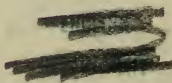


THE UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS
LIBRARY

823
H18b



72.11

Return this book on or before the
Latest Date stamped below. A
charge is made on all overdue
books.

U. of I. Library

NOV 3'37

11148-S



THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

THE
BLINDNESS
OF
VIRTUE

BY
COSMO HAMILTON

Author of

"Adam's Clay," "An Accidental Daughter," etc.



LONDON ;
HUTCHINSON & Co.
PATERNOSTER ROW
1912

823 -

H18b

BRITISH

OF

THE

THE

THE

THE

THE

THE

17013raig

PROPERTY
OF THE
LIBRARY OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

PART I

“Virtue is an angel, but she is a blind one, and must ask of Knowledge to show her the pathway that leads to her goal.”

Research 14 Aug 13 Elliott .60

246299

THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

CHAPTER I

THE three white horses were as big and stout and hairy of leg as brewers' white horses usually are. If anything, they were bigger, whiter, stouter, and more hairy of leg than usual; but the dray to which they were harnessed was piled high with barrels, and the incline up to the bridge over the canal had, it seemed wilfully, been made steep enough to render its negotiation an adventure, almost an impossibility for anything except light carts and motors. Watched by a couple of dozen mildly interested loafing and superfluous able-bodied brutes who are to be found in every English village, these three white horses had strained their hearts out, and had had their mouths jerked, and their legs lashed, and their stomachs kicked several times, but the dray still refused to be dragged to the top of the bridge. For the third time a fat drayman, short of breath and purple of face, jammed a block of wood behind a wheel and joined his companion, who gripped the whip, in a muttered burst of curses. The horses, blowing painfully and sweating profusely, stood with their heads down and legs distended, waiting with

8 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

admirable patience for the next cruel and senseless attack upon them. The working men who never worked spat, tapped their pipes on the iron of the bridge, and thrust their useless hands back into their pockets. A motor-car hooted hoarsely at the bottom of the incline on the far side—the East Brenton side—took the incline slowly, and dipped with a rasping of clutch down and away.

An anæmic nursemaid with a rosy child hanging on each hand joined the spectators, deliberately taking up a position on a spot where she and her charges would certainly be severely damaged by the horses should they, in mounting the incline, get upon the pathway, as happened frequently. In ones and twos others came up—a postman, a chemist's boy on a bicycle, a groom mounted on a corky pony, and a local tradesman, who from his illiterate, pompous, and wholly fatuous remarks to any one who would listen to them might have been a member of the Parish Council, and was.

A barge-horse clattered among the loose stones on the tow-path under the bridge, straining at the rope tied to the nose of a low-lying, gravel-laden barge, out of the many-coloured cabin of which a vermilion-faced woman thrust her head and shoulders, with a hand upon the tiller. The barge cleared the bridge, and a little ragged girl, with turnip-coloured hair, who sat with her bare legs dangling over the side of the barge, shouted shrill blasphemy at the group on the bridge. A man dressed in the red jersey and peaked cap of the Salvation Army rode up on a bicycle, dismounted, and leaned upon his saddle, with a grin upon his villainous face

Then the drayman with the whip made a sudden snatch at the patient and willing leader's rein, gave his mouth several vicious jerks, and, with a yell, commenced to lash the horses with all his strength. Another useless struggle began. Heads down, the three horses scrambled forward, their hoofs making the hard road ring, slipping, stumbling, straining, being shouted at, lashed at, and jagged at. The dray was brought a few yards up the incline before the panting horses flagged and stopped, and slipped down again into the old position before the fat drayman could wedge the block behind the wheel.

One or two of the loafers guffawed. One or two criticised the method of the drayman senselessly but picturesquely. The nursemaid caught the postman's eye and preened herself. The local councillor turned to the Salvation Army man and told him, aitchlessly, exactly what he thought of the surveyor who passed the bridge as fit for use. Not a single man among the crowd considered the possibility of putting a shoulder to one of the dray's wheels. Each one had his dignity to preserve, and there did not seem any chance of earning a drink.

To add to the fun and excitement of the situation the two draymen commenced to quarrel. They began by shouting abuse, the one standing at the leader's head, the other at the back of the dray. Then they drew nearer, talking each other down, until, bantam-wise, they stood nose to nose, both hot, both nerve-wrung, both working themselves into a rage over an incident as to which both were really conscious was not brought about by either. The loafers now saw a chance of genuine entertainment, and without moving or

shifting hands from pockets, added fuel to the fire by dropping in well-chosen encouragement.

The blowing horses stood by patiently, perhaps wondering why the loud angry words were not addressed to them, accompanied by the lash of the whip. The Salvation Army man made a few quick steps towards the men, and drew up irresolute. Although in his paid capacity of universal brother and general peacemaker it was his duty and privilege to interfere, his underlying desire to see a fight held him back.

Just as the fat drayman raised his fist to strike his mate in the face, and all heads were bent forward eagerly, a man sprang off his bicycle, leaned it expertly against the bridge, and put a huge muscular body between the draymen.

"Well, this is a new way of getting a cart over a bridge, I'm hanged if it isn't! Down with your fist, my fat friend, down with it, and get to the back of the cart! And as for you"—he turned to the man with the whip—"if you touch your horses with that thing again I'll lay it about your shoulders."

The men fell back amazed at what they inwardly called interference with several adjectives in front of it. Their voices died in their throats, however, when they examined the man who stood between them. His six foot two of bone and muscle was covered with a thick, brown Harris tweed golf coat and knickerbockers. His thin legs, planted well apart, came to an end in a pair of large, thick shoes, studded with nails. Under the peak of his cap a large, well-formed nose divided a pair of dark, humorous, steady eyes. The lips of a particularly beautiful mouth were set tight. A long determined chin, great square shoulders,

a back as flat as a blackboard, and a pair of long arms settled any half-formed wishes to reply in both men's minds.

"What's wrong? Taking it out of each other because neither of you knows enough of your business to get your cart over the bridge?"

There was a sudden silence. The fat drayman drew a plump hand over his forehead and shook it.

The tall man took off his coat.

"It's the rottenest bridge of any in this foolish county," he said. "That I grant you. But if one of you gets up and takes the reins and the other runs at the leader's head—no jaggings his mouth, though!—we'll run the cart up and over in the twinkling of an eye. Now then, you gentlemen of leisure, off with your coats."

He swept his arm out towards the loafers, who stirred uneasily.

"Now then, postman, back wheel, please. Come along, you chemist's boy. The Salvation Army on my side, top spoke. That's good."

Grinning sheepishly, the postman, the boy, and the Salvation Army man fell in as directed. The rest of the men made no movement.

"If, after I've counted six, the whole of you fellows haven't got off your coats and are ready on the wheels, I'll knock your heads together and pitch you one by one into the canal. One . . . two . . . three. . ."

Apart from the ring of the voice, there was something in the eye and the tilt of the chin of the tall man that took off a dozen coats. They came off slowly—the lining in the sleeves of several made the process difficult—but off they came. Once off, their owners shambled

12 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

forward and stood ready for further orders at each of the wheels.

The fat drayman climbed into the driver's seat and gathered up the reins. The other man stood under the leader's head.

"Drop that whip!"

It was thrown on to the path.

"Now then. On the word go, you on the box will tighten the reins of the wheelers, and shout 'Oop boys' for all you are worth. You at the leader's head will lay your hands on his rein and run forward smartly. We, on the wheels, will turn the spokes with all our might. Is that clear?"

A chorus of "Yuss" rose up.

The tall man wetted his fingers, rubbed his hands together, and closed them over a spoke on the back off-side wheel.

"Go!" he shouted.

There was a scramble, a rush, a ringing of hoofs, a loud whoop from the fat man, and the cart and horses were on top of the incline.

The tall man and the loafers, the postman, the chemist's boy, and the Salvation Army man fell back from the wheels, the brake was applied, and the cart jolted down the other side of the incline and stopped in front of the baker's shop on level ground.

"Good!" said the tall man, as he put on his coat.

The drayman came back, picked up his whip, and touched his cap. "Thankee, sir!" he said.

"Not a bit," sang out the tall man; "better bridges to you. Get back into your jackets, my men, or you'll catch cold. I only hope that your unaccustomed

exercise won't make you all too stiff for loafing. Good-day ! ”

He mounted his bicycle, dipped over the hill towards East Brenton, and disappeared through the railway arch, pedalling hard.

The drayman turned to the postman.

“ Who's 'e, mate ? ” he asked.

The postman grinned. “ I lay you won't guess. He's a sport, any'ow.”

“ Ah ! ”

“ And 'e's our parson too.”

“ A parson ? ” In the drayman's voice there was a note of absolute astonishment. “ Gorblimey, I didn't know as 'ow parsons was men ! ”

CHAPTER II

WHEN the name of Harry Pemberton was mentioned by an ordinary good sort to an ordinary good sort, in the train, perhaps—apropos of parsons, or of East Brenton—or in a Club smoking-room, or in the Pavilion at Lord's, anywhere, everywhere, pretty nearly always the same questions were asked and answered pretty nearly in the same words.

"Harry Pemberton, did you say?"

"Rather!"

"What! Harry Pemberton of the House—the Harry Pemberton?"

"Rather!"

"What! Harry Pemberton who skippered Harrow two years running, and played for Oxford in '86, 7 and 8?"

"Rather!"

"What! Harry Pemberton who played for Middlesex in '92 and 3?"

"Rather!"

"By Jove, he *was* a corker! Hit 'em? Do you remember his liftin' three consecutive balls bang over the pavilion against Sussex?"

"Rather!"

"Ha, ha! I wouldn't ha' missed it for a tenner,

It was just before the General Election in '88. If he'd put up against the biggest political gun of either side, those three hits would ha' put him at the top of the poll into a majority as big as the Pavilion ! ”

“ Rather ! ”

“ I was at the House in his time.”

“ Were you, though ? ”

“ His amazing energy, his absolute indifference to the small conventions of the College, his intolerance of cliques and effeminate men—what he called ‘ poisonous people ’—his intense enthusiasm for all games and for his work, his gigantic optimism and his wonderful personal charm made him, from a fresher, the centre of attraction not only in the House, but in all Oxford. About his cricket one needn't speak. Wherever English is spoken, his name is a household word. But he had other—many other sides. He played tennis invincibly. His drive made professionals melancholy, though he was always a bit weak on the green. He sang ‘ I'll sing you songs of Araby ’ as though it was a drinking chorus—Good Heavens, how he roared !—and the recollection of his performance of ‘ Old Gobbo,’ with the O.U.D.S., makes one chuckle even now. He boxed overwhelmingly well, too, and played chess with the deadly earnestness of a German professor ; and as to ragging, by Jove, he raised it to the level of art ! What a career old Harry Pemberton would have had at the Bar, or in politics ! You should have heard him at the Union ! He hit his opponents as hard with his rhetoric as he hit 'em with the gloves. No man went down from Oxford with a more brilliant future. No tree was too tall for him to climb if he had chosen. And yet, like many a good man before him, he chucked all his chances

16 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

away by going into the Church—the Church, think of it! Any blameless, mild idiot is good enough for the Church. Harry Pemberton ought to have been in the running for the Premiership. It makes me hot to think of how he's wasted himself. Conceive a man like that anchored in a flat, brickmaking, dead-alive, commonplace hole like East Brenton, or Brenleigh, or Brensomething, herding with the hideous, respectable, middle-class nonentities who work out their meaningless little lives in places like this. Good God! you might as well plant an orchid in a cabbage patch, or expect an oak tree to grow in a back-yard beside a corrugated iron bicycle shed, or hang a Reynolds in an Insurance Agent's parlour among oleographs. In the Church! Pemberton!"

"Yes, but although sky-piloting is a waste of such a man's life, he may become a bishop."

"What? Harry Pemberton a bishop! Never. You don't know Harry Pemberton to say a thing of that sort. I was with him for a month's golf just before he was ordained. We played over half a dozen Scots links. Every evening after dinner he'd stick his back to the fire—what a back!—and hold forth on his ideas of Christianity. My dear fellow, if the whole shoot of bishops could have put their ears to the keyholes of the pub parlours we inhabited during that month there wouldn't have been one of 'em who could have dared to show his face in the pulpit again. Why, the very sight of Harry Pemberton would have been enough, even in those early days, to make a bishop's loose flesh crinkle! The holes he punched in their smug dogma were big enough to drive a flock of sheep through. The word dogma made him rise up like an

angry St. Bernard. His religion was the religion of commonsense, not the religion of bishops. He wasn't going to preach the policy of being honest in this world in order to secure a safe seat in the next. He called that the wilful encouragement of diseased egoism. Ye Gods, I should like to have been lying in the luggage rack of a railway carriage in which were seated Harry Pemberton and a bishop! If, at the end of the journey, his lordship hadn't been carried to his palace in a state of nervous collapse, I'll eat my hat! Harry Pemberton in the House of Lords! Have you ever imagined what would happen if you put an eagle in a chicken run, or a *cocote* in a suburban drawing-room among solicitors' wives, or if you fixed up an electric fan in a room full of smoke, or turned a *Dreadnought* searchlight on to a boat-load of smugglers? . . . Harry Pemberton in the Church! What a waste of a good man!"

Or :

"What station is this?"

"East Brenton."

"East Brenton? East Brenton? What does this name . . . I know! Old Harry Pemberton parsons at this flat, uninteresting hole."

"Harry Pemberton? Which Harry Pemberton?"

"Why *the* Harry Pemberton!—the only Harry Pemberton!"

"You don't say so? This is the place, is it? I remember getting quite a shock when I heard that he'd flung up everything to go into the Church. The last man on earth to be a parson. By Jove, we could have done with him in the Service!"

"So could we in the House! As a lanky, raw-

18 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

boned, beardless youth he had a better and clearer grasp of the trend of affairs than many a fuggy M.P. of fifty years standing. And he had the true fighting spirit too, and was a born leader of men."

"Did he show any signs of being pious up at Oxford?"

"No, not pious, but he was absolutely unashamed of being straight. He never rotted, and although he never interfered with the men that did, they jolly soon took his tone. Several men of my time owe everything to Harry Pemberton's barefaced intolerance of the usual thing. He led, and they followed. He never cared a tuppenny dam what other men thought and said of him. He steered a bee line up the middle of the course. No backwaters for him. It was all totally unconscious. He had no side. He preferred the middle of the course, and he stuck to it. Others could follow or not. We followed, of course. A man like that is always followed. He was cut out to be top dog in any profession he took up."

"What made him go into the Church? Did he have a 'call,' or an illness, or a shock, or what? Or did his mother want him to?—or was there a fat living in the family?"

"Oh, bless you, no! His people had been Army and Navy for generations. They were frightfully sick, I remember. But no man or woman living put Harry Pemberton off a thing once he'd made up his mind. I don't know what microbe got into his brain during his last year. I came down before he did. The last time I was with him at Oxford was at a binge in the rooms of one of the eleven. He was as drunk as a lord, and insisted on dancing a breakdown on the

table. I never shall forget the sight as long as I live. It was an old-fashioned, low-ceilinged room over a tie shop in the high. He had to bend his long neck in order to avoid hitting it against the beams. All the eleven—full to the chin—and a dozen more formed two deep round the table and whistled the air of the dance. He danced everybody into a helpless state of windlessness, and then lay on the table and fell asleep, smiling like an enormous cherub ! ”

“ Ha, ha ! ”

“ No, there was no fat living. His people hadn’t a shilling to bless themselves with—didn’t I tell you they were soldiers and sailors ?—nor had Harry. Why he went into the Church . . . ”

* * * * *

Harry Pemberton didn’t allow his bicycle to free-wheel down the hill on the other side—the East Brenton side—of the railway arch. He pedalled hard. He was due at Paxton’s Corner at half-past twelve o’clock. It was a good three-quarters of a mile to old Judd’s cottage, and he had two minutes in which to do it. He did it. The mill hooter made the day hideous as he tilted his bicycle against the railings of the strip of garden, and opened the gate.

Old Joe Judd, gardener by day, poacher by night, philosopher always, was seventy-two. If, during all these years, this capable old rascal had had one day’s illness, it was due entirely to beer. On his seventy-second birthday he suddenly uttered a string of quite appallingly ingenious oaths, dropped his spade, and marched off, coatless, to the doctor’s house, and complained of a pain.

He was given a dose there and then of a light liver tonic, and a bottle of it to take away. He received many bottles of the same medicine, but the pain continued. He went to work every day as usual, only to sit about, in quickly sagging clothes, in thoughtful attitudes. His lurcher slept peacefully o' nights, and no more rabbit-skins found their way into the copper.

One Saturday evening his place in the "George" parlour was vacant for the first time in the memory of East Brenton. The next morning the whole village knew that old Joe Judd had taken to his bed. His numerous sons and daughters—brickmakers and workers in the fields—couldn't say what was the matter with the old man. One day Dr. Cox thought that it might be this, the next he thought that it must be the other. The pain grew worse.

Old Joe Judd was not given much to religion, but during this time he was glad enough to see the parson, for the parson brought into the fuggy little bedroom the smell of turf and a sense of strength, and the news sounded very much better when he read it out than when Alf did. Besides, he never rubbed it in about being sorry, or said melancholy things about hot fires, or made out that God expected him to be anything but what he was born to be. He just talked cricket and local news, and took a hint or two about pruning roses, and when he went away, generally said that God was not a frowning monster, a sort of eternal Gradgrind, but absolutely one of the best. And old Joe Judd felt on better terms with himself.

As usual, Dr. Cox, a good fellow, a sound Tariff Reformer, but a very poor thing in doctors, called in a London man to have a look at old Judd. "I can't

quite make out what's wrong with that old chap," he said. "Not a day's illness in seventy-two years, and as hard as a pea still. All the symptoms of indigestion, but——"

"I'll examine him," replied the London man. "Quite a useful motor this, eh? Now, what do you reckon it costs you to run, including man and petrol and wear and tear?" . . .

That evening Alf Judd called at the Vicarage. He had washed his face, but not his neck, and wore his Sunday coat over his clay-stained waistcoat and trousers. Carefully placing a lighted American cigarette—a more than usually poisonous thing—on the sill of the drawing-room window, Alf followed the cook into the hall. The dining-room door was shut, but Alf could hear the rumble of a rich, deep voice and peals of silver girlish laughter and the mellow laugh of a woman.

The cook entered the room, and shut the door behind her. A sudden hush fell on the room. Alf heard a chair thrust back and the sound of heavy boots, nail-studded, on the polished boards. The door was flung open, and behind the great figure of the parson as he strode up, Alf could see the faces of a very pretty, rather frail-looking woman and a bonny, healthy girl turned towards the door anxiously; a smallish room with white panelled walls, old-fashioned furniture, and a suggestion of pictures in thick dark frames all touched softly with candle light.

Two strong, muscular, kindly hands fell on Alf's shoulders.

"Well, old fellow, what's the news?"

Alf swallowed, and moved from one foot to the other.

"Cancer, sir."

22 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Harry Pemberton's lips tightened, and he screwed up his eyes and raised his shoulders towards his ears involuntarily. His hands closed eloquently round Alf's arms.

"Farver says as 'ow he'd tike it kindly if yew was ter . . ."

"Why, of course. Let's go." He turned to his wife. "Bridge off for me, darling. When Pigott turns up, get him to sing to you, and tell him I'm frightfully sorry. And don't wait up. I'll let myself in. Now then, my lad."

At a quarter to one the following morning, with a very tired face and heavy feet, but with a light as strong and steady in his eyes as a lantern has that has just been filled afresh with oil, the parson stood on his door-step. With his key in his hand he turned and faced the young April moon for a moment and watched her lying in a clear sky among the stars, big and little, wise and foolish, that had served her mother and her mother's mother from the birth of the first Queen of the Night.

There had been rain just after he had left the house several hours before, and the breeze smelt clean and pungent. The night was so clear that the bushes and trees, full of the fire of youth, could be seen nodding their budding branches, and the prim movements of bunches of tall daffodils upon the lawn were plain. Beyond the lawn, with its high bank, dotted with rose-trees proud and happy with families of eager shoots, beyond the meadow and its awakening hedges, a steady line of Grenadier poplars stood, marking the line of the road, with all their fingers silhouetted against the sky.

Harry Pemberton took off his cap and tilted up his chin. "It's a good world that You've given us, Almighty God," he said to himself, "Great Gardener of men and trees, best of Fathers of birds and fishes and little people—it's a very good and beautiful world, to be made the most of by all of us before the winter overtakes us. Old Joe Judd has had seventy-two years of it, and his sons and daughters are asking me why You think it necessary to give him cancer. Just as though You have had anything to do with it, a busy Man like You! Shall I never get Your little people to understand that You don't visit them with pain and suffering—that pain and suffering are merely accidents of life? . . . Old Joe Judd has had a grand innings. He has nothing to grumble about."

He waved his hand to the moon, drew in a long, appreciative breath, and then, with great care, slipped his latch-key into the lock. A lamp was burning on the hall table. Its light fell upon the new driver that had been sent up from the Golf Club while he had been with old Joe Judd. Harry Pemberton caught it up eagerly, and tip-toed out again into the silver night and down the steps. He halted on a patch of prim lawn. Fixing his eye on an imaginary ball, he swung the club several times mightily.

"Hm," he said to himself, "it's a good 'un. A regular corker. Must play a round with it in the morning, if there's time."

Time? If the day had contained twice its hours, and each hour had been twice as long, Harry Pemberton would have found it just as difficult to find time for anything that did not demand his personal attention—the giving out to his friends the villagers of his mag-

24 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

netism, his optimism, his breezy common-sense, his inexhaustible fund of vitality.

Fifty things cropped up in the morning between eight o'clock and twelve: an accident at the Mill; the birth of a child in a cottage in which there was no food or fuel, and no blanket on the bed; the visit to the village of a recruiting sergeant, and the pulling out by the ears of a half a dozen hefty young blackguards to be enlisted; an interview with a member of the Parish Council to endeavour to enforce the proper lighting of the roads at night. These things, and others all trivial, all immensely important, had kept the parson busy.

For all that he arrived at old Joe Judd's cottage as the hooter announced half-past twelve. The previous night he had arranged that old Joe Judd should be taken to the Middlesex Hospital that day. The London man had promised to perform an operation. 'Hopeless,' said he, "utterly hopeless, but it may keep him alive a month or two longer."

Old Joe Judd had no wish to die, but he wouldn't go to the Hospital unless the parson saw him off. So Harry Pemberton entered the garden at half-past twelve, and drew up with an exclamation of anger.

Standing on the narrow, box-lined path was a group of women, daughters and daughters-in-law and mothers of daughters-in-law, and neighbours of the old man. Most of them were dressed in black clothes, as though they were going to the funeral of old Joe Judd, and several were weeping.

Harry Pemberton swung up the path. "The deuce take you!" he said. "What on earth are you here for, in those beastly clothes? You've come to bury the old man before he's dead. If you think you're going

to wring out of this affair half an hour's enjoyable emotion, you're jolly well mistaken. Either be cheerful and full of encouragement or go home and do your washing. Do you hear me? Stop snivelling."

He put his hands on the shoulders of one woman—a thin, ugly creature, with no front teeth, who had thrown a shawl over her head and was indulging in an ecstasy of weeping—and ran her down the path, out of the gate, and into the next-door cottage.

"Stir from here if you dare!" he cried. "You've done nothing since I've known you but quarrel with Joe Judd and spread stories about him. You're not going to have two penn'orth of enjoyment out of him now that he's off to the hospital."

He slammed the door, and returned to the other women.

"Understand," he said. "No tears. Joe is not going away to be operated upon so that you may all have a beautiful cry. He's going away so that he may have a few months more to live. Cheer him. Wish him luck. Make him think that he'll come back as fit as ever. One tear from any of you and you answer for it to me."

A cab drove up. Women and children crowded to the doors of their cottages. The telegraph boy pocketed his golf ball, whistled to his dog, and strolled across the green to watch.

A painter, mounted on a ladder which was standing against the window of the doctor's house, turned round and sat comfortably upon the top spoke. He congratulated himself on having a splendid view. The baker's man, the Brewery boy, Reddish, the landlord of the "George," and the doctor's chauffeur made a group at a corner of the green. Goddard, the grocer,

26 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

took up a position on his doorstep, and a dozen children, just let out of school, rushed up and surrounded the cab.

Harry Pemberton went into the small, low-ceilinged living-room of the cottage. Several men were sitting on chairs ranged along the wall opposite to the fireplace, smoking in silence—sons and sons-in-law, photographs of whom, taken at different stages of their lives, one or two of them in uniform, hung on the walls.

"Now then, my dear fellows," said Pemberton, "no gloominess in front of the old man. Absolute cheerfulness is the order of the day, and a good ringing cheer when the cab drives off. Is the old man nearly ready?"

Before any of them could reply, old Joe Judd's voice was heard. "Aye!" he said, "I be a-comin', sir."

Then followed the squeaking of his best Sunday boots on the narrow stairs. In a blue jacket with a velvet collar, grey trousers, tight at the knee, and belled out at the ankles, a white collar and a red tie over a bulging stiff dickie, a bowler hat at a brave angle, and a bunch of primroses in his buttonhole, came old Joe Judd. His face, glistening with soap, his upper lip shaved clean, his iron-grey stubbly beard well brushed, his little humorous, cunning eyes very bright, the poor old man looked more like going to a wedding than to the operating table.

"Good for you, Joe," sang out Pemberton, swallowing something that came suddenly into his throat. "Buck up, old man; we've just got nice time for the train!"

"Be you a-comin' ter the station, sir?"

"Rather!"

"Thankee!" said the old man.

With great simplicity he went up to each of his sons and kissed him—big men in middle age. His sons-in-law he shook by the hand. Then he followed Pemberton into the garden and kissed each of the now appallingly cheerful women. Then, wearing a proud smile, he got into the cab. The parson hoisted a well-corded, bright yellow tin trunk on the board at the cabman's feet, and got into the cab also.

A cheer was raised by the children and echoed by the men in the garden, and away went the cab.

"Joe," said the parson, "your dog is going to stay with me till you come home again."

"Thankee, sir," said the old man. "Am I a-comin' back, then?"

"Of course you are!" said Harry Pemberton.

CHAPTER III

THE Vicarage at East Brenton had been, a hundred and fifty years ago, a farm house, with granaries and outhouses and cow-sheds and stables. The house, two-storied, square, flat-faced, regular windowed, warm and red of brick, was Queen Anne. Yews, tenderly clipped, grew on each side of its broad, stone steps and framed its doorway. They grew up the walls between the windows also like buttresses, slow of growth, green all the year round. Birds carried on their romances in them, married and settled down in them, and brought up their families in the warm shelter of their arms. Before Harry Pemberton brought his wife and daughter to it this house had been inhabited for thirty years by the former Vicar, a man of great taste and some private means. This man had had the paper peeled from its wainscoted walls and had had them all painted white, according to Cocker. He had also turned the meadow-land, which in his first occupancy of the house had spread over the places where the granaries and outhouses had been, into a garden, with pergolas, rose entwined, with a large, smooth lawn, herbaceous bed-surrounded, and with a rose garden, Dutch-wise in its regularity. He had also made a kitchen garden on

the kitchen side of the house on as near as may be an acre of good earth which lay between four warm walls. Inside and outside the Vicarage was good to see. And as much outside as inside Harry Pemberton had passed twenty of the twenty-four years of his married life. And every year of them had been a year of great happiness, never ending effort and perfect content.

After coming down from Oxford, Harry Pemberton had been appointed curate to the Rector of St. Stephen's, Eaton Square. The bishop who ordained him saw in Harry the makings of a fashionable preacher. He argued that the right place for such a magnificent animal was London—the West End of London. Any shambling, snub-nosed, round-shouldered little man was good enough for yokels. London, feminine London, was only to be drawn into church by men outwardly attractive. Harry was not only outwardly attractive—a physical giant, endowed with what his Lordship called a magnetism almost dangerous—he was also a mental giant. It seemed a pity, his lordship couldn't help thinking, that a man so liberally gifted should have chosen a career in which his chance of advancement was necessarily so small. The Army, Politics . . . However, the Church would doubtless be proud of him, and, at any rate, he should start his career with a blue in curacies.

With unconscious cynicism the bishop therefore appointed the young curate to a church in which his remarkable personality could be made the most of. Its present rector, the third son of a peer who held a high post in the Cabinet, and could not, in consequence, be dislodged, had not proved himself an attraction. Indeed, frankly, his platitudinous sermons, his timid

30 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

conventionality, his total inability to be even mildly daring and piquant, had gradually driven his congregation away. Although an earnest, even an enthusiastic servant of Almighty God, a most honourable, upright minister of the Gospel, he was, as things were, the bishop considered, a square man in a round hole—not of course in any way comparing this place of worship with a round hole, but speaking picturesquely, as it were.

He was pained to notice that the cue of carriages had almost ceased to line up outside the church during the Season, and that, naturally, the offerings, especially on special occasions, were sadly shrunken. This condition of affairs at a church well within the fashionable radius, pained the bishop not a little.

Nothing could be done, even by pulling judicious wires, to dislodge its incumbent. Nothing could be brought up against him either personally or as a servant of Almighty God, which, even were he not his father's son, would enable the bishop to shift him. To put forward as reasons for his removal the facts that he resolutely refused to pander to the modern woman's desire for theatricality in the Church service, that he was physically unable to appeal to their sense of æstheticism, and that he turned away with horror from any suggestion of awakening the fervent religious sensualism that is part and parcel of every woman's constitution, and which, if judiciously and tactfully stirred up, brings great grist to the Church coffers, was, of course, unfortunately impossible. So that, when Harry Pemberton, tanned, wiry, blue of eye, six foot two in his socks, broad of back, with a ringing voice, an immense enthusiasm, an utter disregard for convention, a young Viking with the glorious laurels of athletic

triumphs round his head, had to be placed, what more natural than for the bishop, who was a man of great tact, to send him to Eaton Square.

"I think—I say, I think," said his lordship, in referring to the matter to his secretary, "that this young man will prove quite irresistible at St. Stephen's. In his surplice he will not, it is true, convey the faintest suggestion of that pre-Raphaelitism which was so useful in our early days. He will not attract the young ladies, and other ladies—after all they must be thought of—by reason of any pale etherealism that was once so essential for fashionable success. His appeal will be rather on account of his delightful strength, his healthiness, his unashamed unconventionality. He will astonish. He will be a new sensation. His incongruity will be most fascinating—and, doubtless, he will make a good marriage."

The bishop was right. St. Stephen's, Eaton Square, not many months after Harry preached his first evening sermon, became the thing to do on that wretched day Sunday. All its old glories were unconsciously revived by him. Standing room only was the order of the day. All the beautiful women in London Society, exquisitely and very cleverly made up to resemble notorious Parisian *cocotes*—it was the fashion even so long ago as twenty-four years, and it has never died out—scrambled and elbowed to find pews. Harry quickly became "that darling man." He was pestered with invitations to breakfast, luncheon, tea, dinner, supper.

Married women, and their little dogs, forced their way into his poorly furnished, tobacco-reeking rooms in Eaton Terrace at all times of the day, leaving behind

32 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

them an aroma of delicate scent and dozens of quite judicious confessions.

Unmarried women, without little dogs, with nearly as much to confess, and emitting exactly the same delicate aroma, waylaid him outside the vestry. The leading actors of the day were not half so pestered for photographs, autographs, and lists of their favourite authors as was Harry Pemberton. Nor were their matinées half so crowded as were his morning services.

He was inundated with beautiful pocket-books, silver cigarette cases, hand-decorated bath slippers, hand-made doyleys, hand-knitted silk ties, hand-made suits of silk pyjamas. Married and unmarried women loved him passionately, and threw themselves at his feet. Nothing that he cared to ask for would have been refused. He asked for nothing, and refused everything that was offered—without once realising that everything was offered.

In the first flush of enthusiasm, too one-eyed in his desire to be of use to see clearly the utter insincerity of the people among whom his daily work took him, Harry threw himself heart and soul into his duties. His rector, the Hon. and Rev. Douglas Verschoyle, found in him an honest, fearless, never-sparing young man, and won the undying admiration and esteem of his curate by his own simple, unaffected, God-fearing methods. Instinctively they found themselves resenting the gush and shallowness of the women who began to make their church a happy hunting-ground, and before the end of his first year Harry, like Mr. Verschoyle, began to devote himself entirely to the poor of the parish. His slow discovery that he was merely looked upon by the smart women of the congre-

gation as a new thing to be exploited filled him with disgust. Gradually, the very sight and swish of exquisite clothes, the mere sound of affected voices, caused him nostalgia. He presently gave up going near the women who pestered him with their attentions, and settled down to slum work.

If only he had known it, he could have chosen no more effective way of adding fuel to the fire of their unhealthy desire than by leaving these women to themselves. The more difficult of access he became the more desirable they found him. He was never at home, he would accept no invitation, he refused to see any one after the services, he dodged way-laying parties, he refused to permit the young society girls to work with him among the poor. He sent them back to their pleasures with brusque words. Several of them who were honestly in love with him, and gladly would have sacrificed their social positions and physical comfort to be his wife, were obliged to undergo rest cures and nerve cures and changes of air.

If he was to be seen the services must be attended. So the church was always full, even when the rector preached, as it was his custom to do in the morning of Sunday. Harry preached every Sunday evening, but he gave the sentimental women who stared wistfully up into his face *no* satisfaction. He carefully avoided anything like sensationalism. He made no bitter, eloquent, and highly coloured attacks upon Society, which would have given them great delight. He simply preached the Word of God, the gospel of common sense, with almost boyish abruptness. He allowed himself no theatricalism.

The bishop was satisfied, though frankly puzzled.

34 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

All his preconceived notions of how to make the church attractive turned a somersault. Here was a man deliberately trying to make his church unattractive, and filling it at every service. That Harry Pemberton was a success was an established fact. The Sunday offertories had more than regained their old delightful substantiality. In fact, they were more satisfactory than they had been in the days of Canon Mambly Manson, whose beautiful face, long white hands, flowing chestnut hair, had drawn the town until that epoch-making day upon which he had disappeared utterly and entirely from the scene of his oily triumphs, leaving vague whispers behind him of a warning from the Public Prosecutor, and debts to the extent of several thousands of pounds.

Four years slipped off the calendar. Wars and volcanic eruptions ; deaths of men so great that their countries feared that they could never be replaced, and immediately replaced them ; great political crises filled the papers for a day or two, and were swamped by some brilliant feat in county cricket ; murders, robberies, frauds, the erection of new buildings, the discovery of scientific secrets which revolutionised civilisation,—all these small everyday things occurred, with monotonous regularity, and Harry Pemberton was still to be found at work in the slums with undiminished optimism and whole-heartedness, establishing boys' brigades and gymnasias, clubs for old women and men, cheerfully bullying dirty people into cleanliness, self-indulgent people into healthiness, martyrs into cheerfulness, and sufferers into patience. Everywhere in his parish were evidences of his work. He had won a place in the homes and hearts of the poor. His

influence was almost magical. His good example was to be seen in the most unexpected places, but the offertories of St. Stephen's, Eaton Square, had sunk to insignificance, and the cue of carriages was no longer to be seen. The delicate aroma of scent no longer rose from crowded pews. The fashionable audience had grown tired of a man who refused to pander, and had transferred itself to another place of Sunday entertainment.

And then the gentle rector turned his face to the light and died. His work had been like a constant shower of rain upon dry earth, but his obituary notices were relegated to the columns devoted to minor concerts and amateur theatricals, and notes on gardening.

The incumbency of St. Stephen's, Eaton Square, was vacant. The bishop was inundated with letters from important people begging for the appointment for a second cousin. His lordship sent for Harry Pemberton.

They lunched together in the most friendly and informal way at the Palace. His lordship was kind enough to offer the young clergyman his high praise for his admirable work, "than which," said he, "there was none in any parish more sterling, more acceptable to God." Cricket averages were discussed, the present trend of thought at their mutual Alma Mater, the chances for and against the disestablishment of the Church, the spread of Roman Catholicism in England, the Education Bill and the Code, the latest novel and the latest production of a Shakespeare play.

Over a box of Egyptian cigarettes, the all-important topic of the moment was gradually and cordially approached.

36 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

"Three hundred applications have been made to me for the living," said the bishop, flicking his ash expertly into a silver tray. "But my choice, my dear Pemberton, falls upon you."

Harry flushed up. "Upon me?" he cried. "After four years' work only?"

"Your work has been, as I have said, most admirable," replied his lordship. "I am convinced—and I do not speak hastily and without long and earnest consideration—that you are the best man. You are, of course, very young. But that, my dear fellow"—the bishop had a charmingly breezy manner—"is not a permanent fault. You will grow out of it! Ha! ha!"

"Ha, ha!" echoed Harry breathlessly.

"As you know, the living carries with it twelve hundred a year and many pickings. You can feed almost free. You can have the run of a hundred houses. You are not supposed to return hospitality. You can live like a gentleman, have your little hobbies, and one good Continental, or other, holiday per annum. But—there is in this, as in most other things, a but, my dear Pemberton—you must make certain concessions to modern ideas. Before you accept this church, you must give me your promise to conform more to the needs of its locality. You must become a little more tolerant, a little broader in your methods; in short, to put it plainly, you must consent to pander somewhat, in fact, considerably, to popularity. You must, my dear young man, be more humble and many-sided. You must—I speak to you now as your friend and well-wisher as well as your bishop—pose a little. Society women, whose church St. Stephen's is, must be

humoured. To humour them and to bring them to, keep them in, church you must lay yourself out to be the attractive man. The rôle of St. Anthony is a good one in some parishes—not in the parish of Belgravia. Dear old Verschoyle was quite hopeless. His influence over you helped to empty the church. After all, remember, pretty women, wealthy women, fast women, have souls as well as poor women, and the people in mean streets. You see how desperately well Linthorpe in Sloane Street has cut you out! I don't think I need say any more, eh?"

Harry Pemberton sat very straight in his chair. There was a curious glint in his eyes. It was always to be seen in them when he had gone in to bat. He put his cigarette in the beautiful Jacobean silver tray.

"No, my lord," he said, "there is no need for you to say any more."

"You accept and give me your promise?"

"I refuse, utterly and finally."

The bishop rose with every sign of justifiable temper.

"What do you mean, Mr. Pemberton?"

Harry rose too. His lips were trembling and his face was very white.

"I am not an actor," he said quietly, "or a Society palmist and clairvoyant. If women and men don't come to church of their own free will, I won't, for the sake of twelve hundred a year and free meals, or for the sake of anything or anybody, make grimaces to bring them to it. I have more respect for my Master and for myself."

"Don't talk to me of your Master in that Drury Lane melodramatic manner, sir! I think I know as much of what is due to your Master as you do!"

38 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

"My lord, I am sorry to say that I don't think so." Harry faced the blazing bishop squarely, towering bravely above his lordship's adipose, well-groomed body. "On your terms I can't be the rector of St. Stephen's."

"And I take it that you resign your curacy," cried the bishop.

"If it pleases your lordship."

"It does please me, sir." He pointed a shaking finger to the door.

Harry turned on his heel, and stumped out of the room.

That evening, faced with the certainty of being penniless and churchless, Harry Pemberton asked Helen Dunstan to be his wife.

CHAPTER IV

HARRY PEMBERTON had known Helen Dunstan for nearly four years.

Her father, old Mr. Dunstan—he was not a day more than fifty-five, but he had generally been known as old Mr. Dunstan for many years, and had scoffingly been called Rip Van Winkle at Charterhouse and Oxford—was one of those curious, uncommunicative men who had few friends, fewer acquaintances, and no enemies.

He did nothing. He was almost abnormally devoid of ambition. It was a word he did not understand and did not tolerate. He had inherited eight hundred a year at an early age. Whereupon he chose a wife, married, took the Ebury Street house, put up shelves from the floor to the ceiling of his own absolutely private room, drew up a code of rules for the management of his house, and slowly and with immense care and deliberation bought books.

As he bought them he read them, filling the margins with notes in a small, cramped handwriting, entering the names of each purchase in a large, leather-bound book. His life was as small and cramped as his handwriting, and not more useful than his marginal notes.

Each day was an exact replica of the one before. He rose at eight, drank a tumbler of cold water, bathed and dressed and breakfasted at nine. He then read till ten. Wet or fine, Sunday, Bank Holiday, or birthday, he walked out till eleven-thirty haunting the second-hand bookshops and sale rooms, always carrying an umbrella that he never rolled up, and always wearing a well-brushed silk hat. From eleven-thirty until one-thirty he read, deeply, and with close concentration, as though he were studying for some horribly difficult examination. He regarded these hours as his best.

Luncheon was a silent meal. Unless it was necessary to speak, old Mr. Dunstan never spoke or wished to be spoken to. The manufacture of small talk he regarded as a highly objectionable habit. At the same time eating was a business, not an enjoyment. With each mouthful he religiously counted sixty. He never ate sweets or drank spirits or beer. Barley-water with a slice of lemon was his beverage.

After luncheon he returned to his room and deliberately dozed for half an hour. Then he read until a quarter to seven, at which hour he washed and changed for dinner. A small teapot was brought to his room at four-thirty.

At dinner he always commented briefly on the weather, after the soup; on the book he had bought that morning and on its author, after the fish; asked his wife for a short account of her day's doings, after the joint; and bade her good-night, after the cheese.

Returning to his room he smoked one home-made cigarette, and paced the room until it was smoked out,

and read again until eleven o'clock. He then bathed in hot water and went to bed.

The only paper that was allowed into his house was the *Athenæum*. Daily journalism he held in detestation. He knew nothing and refused to know anything of politics and current events. He was entirely and carefully ignorant of the trend of affairs at home and abroad, in so far as they were reported by and commented on by journalists. All that he did know of these things he gathered from his books.

He had married in order that the necessary domestic machinery of his house should be run smoothly. He had no affection for the little prim lady who had, by accepting him, ruined her life. He held her, however, in the highest consideration and the deepest respect.

She, poor soul, for all her early Victorian ways and appearance, was a woman of sentiment with a romantic side to her beautiful character that was not warped by her strange, silent, regular life, but was fed and encouraged by it. She had fallen in love with Rip Van Winkle, and had remained in love with old Mr. Dunstan. After the first week of married life she realized that her youth and her dreams were over. The shock nearly killed her, but the latent romance in her nature came to her rescue and saved her reason.

Endowed with a faculty for make-believe to an inordinate and most fortunate degree, she instantly built up round her automaton husband a wonderful romance. To her he was not the ego-maniac that he was known to be to others. He was a great student, a remarkable scholar, a wise man, a seer, to be proud of, to be humoured and protected and obeyed. She

attended the funeral of her youth, and rose again devoid of self-indulgence—a ministering angel, a humble, yet proud woman. She dedicated her life to the genius of whom she saw so little, and served him with a degree of imagination that placed her among the Great Artists. The one intense passionate desire of her life was to run his house so perfectly, that while she might never earn a word of praise, she should never deserve a word of blame.

No praise and no blame was ever meted out to her during the five years of her life with him—five extremely happy years which were brought to a close by an event to her so wonderful that it caused her death, and to her husband so unexpected that it upset the routine of one whole week.

She brought into the world a baby girl, had time to feel its warmth and softness once against her heart, and slipped out of life.

Old Mr. Dunstan's feelings at this irrevocable loss were not those of grief. They were of intense annoyance. He knew to a small extent what his wife's death meant to him, to his personal comfort, to his ease of mind. He knew that it was due to a great extent to her that the house was clean and quiet, and that things were not permitted to be moved from their allotted places, but he also knew that upon him would devolve all the upsetting duties that death leaves in its wake, and that the child, the unexpected child, would, if like other children, become a matter for constant worry.

So old Mr. Dunstan, then in the middle of his thirties, sent for a widowed and childless sister, the very spit of himself. She arrived, and on the morning after the

funeral was given, with the longest speech he ever made, the keys of the house and the charge of the child. Whereupon old Mr. Dunstan resumed the routine of his life as if nothing had happened. Two rooms at the top of the house were emptied to receive his ever-increasing list of books, and the house in Ebury Street remained as quiet as ever.

Little Helen Dunstan grew up, and old Mr. Dunstan grew old.

Helen, at eighteen, met Harry, at twenty-four, in the first year of his curacy. She taught in the Sunday school, very quietly, very capably, and passed, slight and small and very sweet, from house to house in the slums. She was her mother over again. She was as prim, as self-effacing, as self-sacrificing, and just as romantic. She was of the stuff that heroines are made of—the unconscious heroines of the house, the commonplace heroines, the angels of domesticity.

When Harry first saw her, she affected him as a rippling tune played on a spinet, as a whiff of lavender, as a verse of simple but exquisite poetry, affects. He found her a good listener, an invaluable lieutenant, an accurate, punctual, absolutely reliable second-in-command. Her unruffled temper, her quick intuition, her inexhaustible sympathy, her surprising optimism, her unconditional, unlimited faith, acted upon him refreshingly, fed him in his hungry moments, encouraged him always.

He didn't fall in love with her as she instantly fell in love with him. He gave her his confidence and his trust, was unable to do without her constantly at his side, would have missed her as the earth would miss the sun.

44 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

She, small, neat, dainty, unobtrusive, was the pansy type of woman rather than the rose—the woman who bloomed in a quiet, charming, and steady way almost all the year round, unaffected by change of temperature, by cold and wet, content to take her place in the side-walks of life, not the woman, rose-like, of great beauty of colour and form, who bloomed gorgeously, almost insolently, for every one to see, and fell to pieces in the first storm.

For nearly four years these two worked together, side by side, she so little, he so big. During these busy years she had grown about him as ivy grows about an oak. She had no hope of marrying him, and never gave the matter even so much as a thought. This did not prevent her from loving him as a lark loves the sky, as a dog her master. Nor had he the smallest intention of asking her to be his wife. He had no time to think of marriage.

But as he left the bishop's palace, a man without a church, and knew that his schools, his gymnasias, his clubs, his slums, his large circle of friends, would know him no more, a great wave of loneliness, of homesickness, of depression swamped him, and he hurried to Ebury Street. His eager, peremptory knock startled old Mr. Dunstan out of his afternoon doze, and made Helen look quickly across the drawing-room at Mrs. Maberly.

Harry took the stairs three at a time, and came upon the quiet, industrious women like a south-east wind.

With the greatest difficulty he kept back an almost over-mastering desire to take the girl in his arms and carry her away. Tea came in and steadied him, and

Mrs. Maberly said stereotyped things about the lateness of the spring. But Helen knew that something had happened. This was not the first time by many that the curate had smothered one of the neat drawing-room chairs or swallowed up in his large hands one of the small afternoon tea-cups. She knew by the distention of her master's nostrils and the wideness of his eyes.

He waited until Mrs. Maberly had finished tea, restlessly, eyeing her almost fiercely. Then he leaned forward, covered her hand with one of his, and said, "Don't think me most awfully rude, but could you possibly think of anything very important that you haven't said to cook?"

Then he got up, marched to the door, and held it open. A look of utter bewilderment came into the elderly lady's face. She gazed at the big, electrical man for a moment through her gold-rimmed glasses, with her back stiff and her eyebrows meeting; then her face suddenly melted. Stooping down, she hastily gathered up her workbasket, bent over Helen, and dropped a kiss upon her cheek and ran.

Harry shut the door, and strode over to the girl's chair.

"Do you understand?" he asked. "I am leaving this place. I have had to give in my resignation. But I can't go without you. Will you come with me?"

"Please!" she said. "I will be your housekeeper."

A great laugh burst from Harry. He stooped, put his hands under the girl's elbow, and lifted her up.

"Blow housekeeper!" he said, looking into her face. "I love you, and I shall be useless without you. Be my little wife."

46 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Sitting in the next room, with her spectacles too dim to see through, Mrs. Maberly heard a cry. She jumped up, left the room, and opened the drawing-room door. She saw Helen standing on a chair, wrapped up in Harry's arms, with her face down upon his shoulder.

CHAPTER V

AN hour later, soothed, quieted, and more confident, Harry took the narrow stairs which led up to old Mr. Dunstan's sacred room two at a time.

He knocked at the door, sharply. A thin, reproachful, and surprised voice called out, "Who is it? What do you want?"

Harry entered.

Sitting in a comfortable arm-chair, a few yards away from a small, well-behaved fire, he saw a little, neat, elderly man, dressed with scrupulous care, shaved and brushed perfectly, spectacles resting upon a thin, straight nose. In front of him, upon a reading-stand, stood a large book, at such an angle as would permit its reader to write upon its margin, should he deem it necessary or unnecessary to do so!

Harry caught a startled, irritable glance from a pair of small grey eyes and heard an exclamation of annoyance. He stood for a moment upon an excellent Turkey carpet, and breathed in the atmosphere of the quiet, aloof room. From floor to ceiling there were line upon line of books. More books stood in piles upon the floor, and were ranged along the mantel-shelf. One of the windows was open, an inch from the top, but the air of a busy, striving, progressive world

48 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

seemed to refuse to enter this unmoving, archaic place. Harry felt like an explorer who passes suddenly out of the sun into a dell thickly roofed in with the old arms of ancient trees through which no daylight has pierced for years.

Blinking and instinctively lowering his voice, he said, "I beg your pardon for disturbing you. Can you give me a moment?"

Old Mr. Dunstan shivered. The sudden contact with a man so full of life, who breathed of energy, of modernity, of endeavour, of electricity, affected him uncomfortably.

"What is it, please?" he asked.

"My name is Pemberton—Harry Pemberton. I am a clergyman with whom your daughter has worked for four years."

"Oh! I've heard of you," said old Mr. Dunstan.

"That's a help," said Harry involuntarily. "I've just asked Helen to marry me. She has no objection. Have you?"

"None whatever," said old Mr. Dunstan hastily. "Is that all?"

"That's all," said Harry.

"Then, good-afternoon," said old Mr. Dunstan.

"Good-afternoon," said Harry.

When he got back to his rooms that evening, and sat down to a hurried and lonely meal, among his pipes and papers, boots and bats, tobacco tins and photographs of University groups, a feeling of renewed strength, hope, and determination filled his heart. He had lost his post, but he had won an angel. There were other posts that he could and would fill with, please God! more energy and more sympathy, and

here was, to his hand, a woman, utterly without pride and conceit, from whose inexhaustible spring of Faith and goodness he would drink so long as the earth was beautified by her presence—a woman who, by accepting him as a husband, conferred upon him an honour and a blessing that could be properly appreciated only by the dedication of his life to her and to all that she represented.

He laughed loud and long over his brief interview with old Mr. Dunstan. All the same, it gave him a lesson that he should never forget. What, after all, did marriage matter, the giving of a daughter's life into the hands of a stranger? Very little—nothing. That old man, rank egoist, of no use in the scheme of life, the husk of a man, of no more value than a puff of smoke, considered that his reading was of monumental importance. His work, according to himself, was vital. Death, marriage, and all the other incidents of the hour and day must not be allowed to disturb him.

Harry read into this attitude a sort of reprimand. It must not matter to him whether he lost a post here and took one up there, whether he were married or single, happy or unhappy. His work must come first—the work he conceived it to be his duty to carry out.

And so with this feeling upon him he served the remainder of his time as curate at St. Stephen's, Eaton Square, to the best of his ability and waited—as a soldier waits for his marching orders to go to another scene of action.

It happened that, a day or two before he preached his last sermon in St. Stephen's, he came face to face in Sloane Square with a man called Blois who had been

up at Oxford in his time. This man, an excellent fellow and good sportsman, was lord of the Manor of East Brenton in Middlesex. The living of the place was in his gift. The old Vicar had died suddenly. As much for the welfare of the place, for which Blois had some sentiment, as from a desire to serve a man he admired and liked whole-heartedly, he begged Harry to step into the old Vicar's shoes. Harry jumped at the offer. Beyond all things, he wanted to work in a place less ever-shifting than the parish of St. Stephen's. Working in the slums of Belgravia was much like baling out a pond fed by a spring. It was no sooner emptied than it filled again. He wanted to fix his whole attention on a place in which the people lived more or less permanently—as permanently as it pleased the unrespecting, indiscriminate Angel of Death to permit. In such a place, however small, he could, at least, make it his business to see that the people, however few, took on a kinder, cleaner, more sober, more optimistic, view of life, and keep them to it.

The day after he left Eaton Square found him in possession of the Vicarage, East Brenton, a married man. By mutual consent the Pembertons decided against spending their honeymoon in uncomfortable seaside rooms, or at some poky little hotel dumped down on the edge of a golf links. For one thing, Harry had no money. He never had any money. And for another, both he and Helen were eager to set to work again. They were filled with the itch that possesses good gardeners to hoe and weed and tidy up; plant, water, and cultivate.

They found the Vicarage a kind of paradise. Young May stared them in the face when they arrived and

welcomed them with all her most exquisite charm of manner. She had burst into ebullience after a late, dank, depressing spring. She had awakened all the trees and hedges. Their first fresh green was almost dazzling. The fruit-trees were powdered with blossom. The big, fat chestnut buds were on the verge of bursting, the little eyes of the lilacs just about to open wide. In the Vicarage garden the beds were filled with yellow regiments of daffodils and a white army of narcissi. The small blue staring eyes of forget-me-nots looked up wonderingly at the sun. White pansies clung together in the quiet beds, and golden and terra-cotta wallflowers made bold splashes of colour. The heads of sweet-peas had emerged from the earth, and were strained to catch the view. Lilies, as yet in the first flush of girlish grace, stood erect with all their slender fingers stretched.

Under the eaves of the old house the martins chattered as they built their nests or darted here and there screaming with delight and mischief. Blackbirds and thrushes made little eager, nervous excursions upon the lawn on the hunt for careless worms with which to feed their babies. Larks flung themselves into the warm air and sent up their miraculous solos to Heaven. A colony of white pigeons gurgled on the roof of an ancient barn, and strutted after each other now with grotesque dignity, now with sudden runs, head down, tail lowered, now with waltz-like movements upon the lawn and along the gravel paths between the rose-trees.

As the sun went down behind a line of poplars that first evening to the soft anthem of a countless choir of bird voices, Harry and his little wife stood hatless,

hand in hand, and looked silently and eagerly and bravely out upon the village which lay beyond their gates. On the flat green three elderly horses fed, their day's work done. A bevy of boys played cricket in the fading light with shrill shouts. One after the other a party of crows flapped heavily homeward, very black against the cloudless sky. The chimney of a brewery shot out from among its broad roofs and towered about the heads of cottages that straggled, unevenly, or in ugly rows, round the borders of the green. Oil-lamps flickered in the windows of a shop or two, and gleamed brightly and invitingly in the windows and above the doors of three Inns. A party of sturdy field-girls stumped in single file and in couples along the narrow path singing softly through their noses, and in their patches of front garden tired women stood, bare-headed, circulating gossip. A string of market carts, loaded with cabbages, made their way slowly towards London, and a faint breeze stirred the sleepy young leaves.

"Here stand the two Vicars of East Brenton, darling," said Harry softly, "and there lies East Brenton, and over us all sits God. Give us both strength and courage, Father, caution and patience. We are very keen, we two, spoiling to do our work. Grant that we may plant in Your children's hearts the seed of Your love, and bring into their drab lives some of Your great optimism, for Jesus Christ's sake."

CHAPTER VI

THERE were two kitchens in the back of the Vicarage. They were divided by a passage that ran from the front door to the back door. One opened out into the kitchen garden, the other looked out on to the lawn from one window and on to the Dutch-wise rose garden from the other.

This room Harry pounced upon at once, planted in it an immense desk, hung it round with his cricket groups, stuffed its corners with his cricket bats, golf clubs, and tennis rackets, and crammed its village-made shelves with a heterogeneous mass of silver cups, books, pipes, and tobacco tins, photographs of old friends, a box or two of golf balls, and the Lord knows what besides.

Over the fire-place he hung a card. It was a large card upon which in large red letters a long word was printed. The word was Optimism.

He hung this up on the first morning of his possession.

The card is black, and its red letters are pale. It has hung there not for a year, but for twenty years, and is a year older than the sweet slip of a girl who often sits beneath it. It has seen Harry and his little wife grow older, but not old. It has witnessed many a scene of domestic happiness, many a scene of pain and

depression, heard many a tale of village woe and grief, many a parish council argument, many a concert of loud coarse voices, many a lesson delivered with breezy kindness, many a confession of sin and crime, of remorse and anguish, but never, never a sound from the owner of the room in which it hangs to show that he had forgotten the meaning of its word.

Harry began his work as an optimist—otherwise he never would have begun it. As an optimist he continued it in the village, in the brickfields, and on the barges of its canal day after day, year after year, for twenty years.

The good people of East Brenton were mainly workers in the market gardens and on the farms. Those who were not, worked in the brickfields, in the mills and factories, and on the canal. But many of them, able-bodied men, worked as little as possible, preferring to stand about in the middle of the road, poaching and stealing when they got the opportunity, and sending their wives and children to the few better-class houses round the green to beg. Most of their money, earned or cadged, was spent in the public-houses. Of these there were as many as there were churches and chapels. There were the Parish Church and the "George," the Roman Catholic Church and the "Four Bells," the Baptist Chapel and the "King's Head," the Methodist Chapel and the "Bull," the Salvation Army Quarters and the "Blois Arms."

Half the inhabitants of this flat-lying, unbuilt-on, undiscovered place, which was cut into strips by the ways of several winding streams, went to one or other of these places of worship; the other half infested these places of beer. And all were ignorant, thriftless,

lethargic, dull, unhealthy, and suspicious. They knew everybody else's business and very little of their own. They went, from year to year, on exactly the same lines, always complaining, always more or less in want, never putting by in the good times for the bad they knew would follow inevitably.

But they were English and Irish, and they had all the insular liking for a sportsman. Harry's reputation as a cricketer opened all doors to him. They overlooked his having the misfortune to be a parson, and only remembered that he had played for Oxford and his county.

And Harry never let them remember that he was a parson. He won their confidence and friendship as a sportsman, and kept it by remaining a sportsman. Most of his best sermons were preached on the village cricket field with his bat. The rest he preached with his golf clubs, his billiard cue, his fine baritone, his cheery, breezy personality, his characteristic energy, his clever organisation, his simplicity.

He kept the name of God in his hands, and not in his mouth. For so-called religion he had as little liking as any villager, and the mere mention of dogma brought forth a very torrent of grim common sense. He cultivated souls by catering for bodies and by brightening up lives. Not in his church did the man-made, brow-beating God, the cruel, punishing monster, find a place, nor in his quiet teaching. His God was the great optimist, the great sportsman, the man who had suffered without whining, the tender-hearted brother who forgave and understood, and sympathised, and made allowances, and who could be approached direct, as any other brother could be approached, and

who was not a shadowy arrogant being, hidden from the eyes and hearts of men by heavy vestments, cloying incense, mysterious rhodomontade, threatening tirades, and irksome rules. In his church and in his manly, simple teaching only the once human Brother and now divine Father, always ready to help, to encourage, to forgive, to urge on, to protect, to make self-reliant, reigned supreme.

He did not preach. He performed. He did not worry if his church was empty so long as the men took less to drink and knocked their wives about less frequently. To achieve this first great step he first divided up his evenings between the public-houses, started games and established sing-songs, encouraged the men to bring their wives and sweethearts into the inn parlours, arranged for magic lantern shows in the cold, dull, winter evenings, and finally weaned many men and women out of the public-houses by building three large rooms by the side of the school and making them bright, warm, cheerful, and amusing.

In the men's room there were eventually two billiard tables, self-supporting; three card tables, at which betting for very small sums was allowed. In the women's room, reigned over by Helen, there were illustrated papers, facilities for needlework, a piano, a warm carpet, and comfortable chairs. The third room had a good floor for dancing, and a small platform for pleasant and amusing lectures and readings.

No one was invited to this club. All who made use of it were elected members, and helped in a small way equally to keep it up. Beer and tobacco could be bought at the usual price, for the place was duly licensed as a club, and on its committee and among its

active members were the better-class people who lived in the neighbourhood, the priest, the nonconformist minister and the captain of the Salvation Army.

Jealousy, class differences, personal dislike, and a dozen other troubles to which such places are invariably subjected would have ruined it many times but for the tact and breeziness of Helen and Harry. By unfailing personal attention, spread over many patient years, the application of daily imagination and humour, it became at last and remained the great popular institution of the village. No man entered it unwashed, no woman frowsy. The temptation to get drunk was removed by the pleasure of remaining sober. Only when sober could the games be enjoyed and played creditably. Such a place in a village removed from large towns, in which the only excitement was provided by the occasional visits of travelling circuses and roundabouts, was a God-send.

There was always, of course, a small detachment of men and women who stuck to the public-houses and refused to make use of the club because the small exertion of getting clean was too much for them. But their influence and example were small.

The club flourished, and became the parent of many smaller clubs, a boys' brigade, of which Harry was the Commanding Officer, and able-bodied parents and big brothers the officers and non-commissioned officers; cooking and needlework clubs for girls of which Helen was the acting president; quoits club for the old men, cricket and football clubs for men and boys, and a lending library for every one. In them all Harry was the leading spirit. Men and boys, women and girls, followed him from one to another, and if all did

58 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

not follow him eventually into the church, many did, and in the hearts of those who did not, the seeds of kindness and fellowship, honesty, cleanliness, self-reliance, and good sportmanship took gradual and unconscious root.

No attempt was made either by Harry or Helen or by any of their helpers to tempt any man or woman either from the Roman Catholic Church, or from the Baptist and Methodist Chapels, or the Salvation Army. They didn't care in what building or under what appellation God was worshipped. Neither the building nor the sect could alter the fact that it was God who was worshipped. The same tonic is as good out of a flat red bottle as out of a long blue one whatever the label may be.

"It isn't my business whether a man finds God easier to come by in my church or in any other," Harry held, "so long as he finds God."

CHAPTER VII

HAVING safely deposited old Joe Judd at the Middlesex Hospital, the parson made a dash for Paddington Station to catch the first available train home. He plunged into it, and sprinted up to the time-table board to find that a fairly good train had just gone. This meant that he would have to wait thirty-eight minutes for another and miss lunch at the Vicarage.

It was not often that Harry could afford either the time or the money to go to London. The bustle and underlying excitement of the station, therefore, affected him pleasantly. He felt that he had got thirty-eight minutes' holiday before him.

"What a frightful yokel I am," he said to himself. "Hanged it I don't feel like a blessed school-boy."

He stood near the book-stall and watched the passengers bundle into an express, and found himself wondering who they were, what they thought about, and for how long a time they were going away ; whether they were married or single, and what sort of a ball they drove.

Three of His Majesty's seamen were hanging, or trying to hang, out of the window of a third-class smoking-carriage. Half a dozen weedy cockney men

and three undersized young women in large hats were seeing them off. There was much badinage and noise. One of the men was playing "Give my love to mother," on a mouth organ, and one of the sailors, not drunk, but nearly, was singing the ultra-sentimental words, slowly and intensely. A consumptive-looking, hollow-chested, pasty-faced creature, who had had several glasses of beer more than he could stand, was dancing. Bending almost double, with his arms stretched out, and his hat on the back of his head, he moved his feet slitheringly about on the platform from the heel to the toe, with an expression on his face of great solemnity. He was evidently the acknowledged comedian of the party, for although to Harry's eye, and the eyes of many other people who were watching him, there was something more pathetic than funny about the performance, one of the girls was keeping up an hysterically painful fit of laughing. She smacked his back frequently, and cried out, "Ow, chuck it, Challee, do! You'll give me a fit!"

One of the sailors, with a silly expression of love-sickness on his face, stretched out a large hand, the wrist and back of which were gorgeously tattooed, and put it inside the lace collar of one of the girl's necks. With a shriek she struggled to get free, without wishing to do so, and leaning forward gave the sailor's brown cheek a resounding smack. The sailor pulled her close to the carriage door. The girl gave a hurried glance at the clock, and grew suddenly quiet.

"Mind you write to us, Bill," she said.

"Not 'arf," said Bill.

"You'll wait for me?"

"Not 'arf," he said fervently.

"Yuss, likely, I don't think!"

"Orlright then!"

There was a little pause. They gazed into each other's eyes.

"Oo am I, Bill?" she asked.

("Stand away there, please!")

"*You* know," said Bill.

"Well, can't you say it?" she cried shrilly.

Bill's fat, round, brown face creased up into a fatuous smile, and his head rolled from side to side.

"My future. Wot o'!"

Springing on the board, the girl flung her arms round his neck and kissed his lips.

There was a roar of laughter from the other sailors and the other girls. The train moved slowly away. Until it was out of sight the sailors waved and the girls waved. The man with the mouth organ still played, and the comedian still slithered his feet about.

Then the girl turned, bit her quivering under lip, and walked quickly away. The others followed. For a moment or two the mouth organ could be heard through the noise. The whole party was swallowed up in the moving crowd.

Harry Pemberton shot out a sigh and turned to the book-stall. Every available inch of its space was filled to overflowing with gaudy-covered magazines, cheap editions of popular novels, reprints of classics, new books, all of them labelled "The book of the day," and with piles of weekly, bi-weekly, and daily papers. To Harry's eye all the weekly papers, copies of which hung from the top of the stall, seemed exactly alike. All of them exhibited large photographs of pretty, plebeian women standing or lying in impossible attitudes

62 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

with just enough chiffon wrapped round them to look completely and strenuously indecent. All of them contained full-page black-and-white drawings, which were labelled "The Humour of the Hour," or something of the sort, and were not only painfully unfunny, but were very badly drawn in wash. The Society weeklies displayed the same snap-shots of well-known people with their eyes screwed up and their mouths open, and of golf professionals at the top of their drive.

He bought the latest edition of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, stuffed it into his pocket, and swung along the platform to the Refreshment Rooms. A tall, soldierly man, wearing two medals on a curious tunic, half uniform, half livery, saluted and opened the door.

Harry found a seat at a table, near a cubby-hole, in which, behind a counter, sat a pale girl in a neat black dress, with her hair dressed mountainously. Behind her, with her head on a level with a shelf packed tight with bottles, loomed the figure of a tall, dignified woman. Her features were cut on fine lines, grandly chiselled. They were set almost sternly, and there was an air about her of rigid self-control, unobservant watchfulness and unhurried quickness.

Harry hatted her, and threw her a smile. She returned his breezy salutation with a look of cordial welcome. A waiter held in front of him a large card on which, closely printed, was a lengthy selection of eatables.

"Cold beef," said Harry, without looking at it. "Underdone. Potatoes, hot. I said hot. Pickled walnuts, and a bottle of ale. I needn't add quickly, because if you're not quick here you're nothing."

The waiter was English. He knew his customer to be the Mr. Pemberton whom he had frequently seen in his younger days plant a ball into the pavilion at Lord's. He determined, though tired, to break a record.

A slight, good-looking, scrupulously well-groomed man, with a small moustache twisted up toward his nose, came in, and gave his hat to the suddenly deferential doorkeeper. His entrance caused a slight stir in the room, and all eyes were turned upon the apparently unconscious but quite appreciative Cabinet Minister.

He pulled out a chair in front of Harry, and their eyes met.

"Hullo, Bunny!" said Harry, holding out a cordial hand.

"My dear Harry!" said Lord Thorganby, gripping it eagerly.

They both laughed.

"This is a rum place to meet."

"Not so very," said Thorganby, sitting down. "We said good-bye here when we came down together from Oxford. Good Lord, how many years ago?"

"Ten minutes ago," said Harry.

"Five, by the look of you. Time has forgotten to leave his fingermarks on you, old man. How's cricket?"

"Fairly strong," said Harry, laughing. "I can put three elevens on the field all good for a score. Our first played the Blackney Rubber Works last Saturday—our opening day, a very hot lot too—and made rings round 'em."

Thorganby looked mystified. "Oh! yes, yes. Blackney, near East Brenton on this line. Oh, yes! of course. I remember. You're at East Brenton." He said this with a note of regret in his voice. "Are you always going to be at East Brenton?"

"I hope so."

"Married, eh, Harry?"

"Rather, Bunny."

"Any children?"

Harry smiled. "A large family of one girl."

"Oh, good! How old?"

"Eighteen. By Jove! no nineteen. To-morrow's her birthday. I say, I'm glad you asked. I'd forgotten." He whistled, and made a note on his cuff.

"Your wife's well, I hope?"

"She's always well. She has no time to be anything else, bless her! How's yours, Bunny?"

A slightly sarcastic smile twisted up one side of the successful politician's mouth. He refrained from saying that, owing to having so much time on her hands, she spent most of it far from well with a beautiful person who held a post at Court.

"Very well indeed, thanks!" he said. "I've just come from Eton. My boy's there."

"Bunny II, eh? A good chap, I'll be bound."

The sarcastic smile was driven away by one of supreme affection. "Ha, ha! I should think so!" said Thorganby.

"What's he do? Bat or bowl?"

"Bat. He'll play against Harrow this year."

"By Jove!"

"He goes on to Oxford in the course of time."

"I should think so. Will he go into politics?"

Thorganby screwed up his eyes. "No," he said, "no—not unless he's no good for any honourable profession."

Harry opened his eyes wide. "Any honourable——"
The beef and pickles came. So did the beer.

"I don't call politics an honourable profession," replied Thorganby quietly. "Anything hot? Lamb? Thank you! Whisky and soda. I don't say that politicians individually are not honourable men. But you know as well as I do, better, that the institution of politics is a shifty, time-serving, populace-crawling thing. I wish to God there was no such thing as politics! It's ruining the country. It ought to be run as a sound business concern is run—by an able Board of Directors. What would become of Harrod's Stores if it were controlled by its shareholders? However, don't let me mount the white horse; let's talk about ourselves. Do you realise that we said good-bye here—beer, wasn't it, or was it whisky?—twenty-three years ago or more?"

The lamb came.

Harry passed the salt. "What of it?" he asked. "We're not freshers, but, thank Heaven! we're not progs. I'm only forty-three."

"Only forty-three!"

"Forty-three down, forty more to go."

"An optimist still?"

"Still? My dear Bunny, I'm only just beginning to be a genuine optimist."

Thorganby shot up his face, and looked at Harry with a sort of whimsical, almost regretful earnestness. "My dear old Harry," he said, "optimism is one of the only things a man can never acquire, not if he goes

66 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

into training for it every mortal day of his life for twelve hours a day."

"Rot!" said Harry, attacking a pickled walnut.

"No, no, not rot. Either it's born in him, like bowling with the left, or not. If it's not, all the luck in the world, a gorgeous climate, nothing and nobody, will ever put it into him. You were born with it."

Harry dropped his knife and fork, closed his small regular teeth with a snap, and snorted through his nostrils. Just for a fleeting moment his old friend saw a shadow pass over his face, making it for the eighth part of a minute very bitter. With an effort he watched him suppress a rush of words, and shake himself back into his normal state.

"Oh, well, that's all right," said Harry. "The fact remains, thank God! that I'm an optimist. Come to East Brenton, and you'll jolly soon become one, I can tell you."

"I may come," replied Thorganby, with a laugh, "if I'm turned out of my seat at the next General Election by the Tariff Reformer—as is quite likely."

He spoke lightly enough, but in the back of his head an old and frequent self-put query took gradual shape. "What the dickens made Harry Pemberton chuck all his chances and go suddenly into the Church? What was the secret of this volte-face? What forced him to take such a step?" . . . "How long have you been at East Brenton?" he added.

"Nearly twenty years."

"Good Lord! What a waste! . . . I mean, what a long time to be in one place—and so small a place."

"Twelve hundred inhabitants, Bunny."

A sudden thought struck Thorganby. "Look here, Harry. Seeing you reminds me of the fact that I intended to write to you. So it isn't a bit odd that I should stumble into you to-day. Things like this happen always."

"Write to me? After all these years? Why?"

"Well, an afternoon or two ago, MacLachlan spoke to me about a vacant Canonry at Westminster. He knows I make it my business to keep my eyes on all kinds of men—even parsons."

"Even parsons! Be hanged!" laughed Harry.

"We walked away from the Lords together, and as he's on our side, and a very decent old thing, I said I'd look round for him. He never knows who to promote, and is thankful to be helped out."

"He's got quite decent calves for gaiters," said Harry. "More beer, please."

"Canon Pemberton, eh? Eventually Dean Pemberton, and possibly Bishop——"

Harry threw back his head, and gave out a great laugh.

"What's the matter?" asked Thorganby, catching its contagion.

"Look at the size of my boots," cried Harry. "Think of them sticking out from beneath smug gaiters, on the platform of a Primrose League meeting, or at a mothers' meeting of reformed duchesses. They'd trample on everybody's pet corns, squash all the black beetles of secretaries and chaplains, and kick over half the fuggy conventions of the Church. You can't make a gatling gun into a canon without something happening, old man."

Thorganby was not laughing. He looked impatient. "Oh, hang you and your big bones! You're wasting

68 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

yourself mewed up in your unheard-of village. You always were top dog. Come and be top dog again."

Harry rose quickly with the air of a man who is tempted to steal and doesn't mean to succumb. "Bill, please!" he called. He stretched out a hand. "Bunny, old man, it's been a great delight to see you again. Good luck to you always."

"Yes, but——"

Harry gripped his friend's slim hand hard. "But nothing, thanks all the same," he said. "If I become a decent parson I shall be perfectly satisfied."

He collected his hat and stick, paid his bill, waved his hand to the Cabinet Minister, and hurried out of the food-reeking room.

He caught his train by the skin of his teeth, and as he sat on the narrow, hard seat in a third-class smoker and loaded a pipe, a curious smile played round his lips, although in his eyes there was an expression of introspective disgust and distrust.

"If I can become a decent parson," he repeated aloud, "I shall be perfectly satisfied."

CHAPTER VIII

THAT night, at half-past eleven, after they had walked back hand in hand from the club rooms, Harry and Helen, very tired, but extremely cheerful, stood in the hall of the Vicarage for a moment and listened.

Not a sound, except the sleepy regular ticking of an elderly grandfather clock, broke the delightful quiet of the house. The stillness of the outside night was made more refreshing by the full piping of a blackbird and the occasional soft child-like cry of an owl.

Harry and Helen listened for any movement there might be in Effie's room. There was none. Nor was there any suggestion that the cook was still in the kitchen—neither from the ultra-respectable cough that was peculiar to that funny old creature, nor the shuffling sound of her list slippers upon the boards, nor from her usual greeting, apparently cheeky, but really only affectionate: "Oh, there you are, you two! Well!"

Harry did what he always did when he was alone with his wife and wished to monopolise her attention. He put his hands under her elbows, picked her up, without an effort, and stood her on a chair.

"What are you thinking about, little one?" he asked softly.

"Exactly what you are thinking about," she said, putting her arms round his neck.

"I thought so. . . . In half an hour's time Effie will be nineteen."

"Isn't it wonderful!" she said.

"Wonderful that she'll be nineteen, or that she's Effie?"

"Both."

Harry chuckled.

"Sssh!" whispered the little woman. "Don't wake her!"

"Mayn't I chuckle in my own house, tyrant?" Harry suddenly wrapped his arms round his wife and held her tight. "I nearly lost you nineteen years ago, my dear! Very nearly. You gave me Effie and stood very close to the open door. Are you glad you didn't go in and leave us both alone?"

"Oh, Harry!"

He pushed her away from him and looked into her eyes. "Have I been a good man to you, little woman? Have I left anything undone that you would like me to do? Have I been even half grateful enough that you stayed?"

She bent forward slowly and kissed him.

A candle flickered on the landing. It was held aloft by a small old woman, whose scanty brown hair was primly plaited for the night. Its light fell upon a face slightly pock-marked, with arched eyebrows over small, bright eyes, the lid of one of which was permanently and discomposingly lower than the lid of the other. Showing beyond the lips of what had once been a rather pretty mouth were two lonely teeth. There was a dimple in the right cheek. It was Miss Ethel

Meadows, affectionately and universally known as Cookie, and she wore, as she had worn at that time of night in that house for twenty years, a bundly black skirt and a thick brown woollen dressing-jacket with a wide, jaunty stripe. The engagement ring, which she had worn for the same twenty years, gleamed upon her finger.

"Nice goin's on, I don't think," she said. "Weren't you two up early enough in the mornin' that you must carry h'on inter ther night?"

Mrs. Pemberton slipped off the chair, and Harry turned and shook his fist at the queer little figure on the stairs.

"Shut up, and go to bed."

Cookie deliberately came down. "P'r'aps," she said. She put the candle on the hall table, and then locked and shuttered up the front door noisily.

"Sssh!" whispered Helen.

"All right, all right!" said Cookie. "Do you know that he left the front door open last night?"

"What!" said Harry.

"Harry!" said Helen.

"Yuss, you did. And you know it. I don't want ter git you into trouble, but if I didn't know your little ways and come down, some of your beauties in ther village would crep in and pinch ther silver."

"Do you believe her?" asked Harry.

"Yes," said Helen, smiling!

"Yuss, an' when we do lock up and bolt, he goes and leaves ther winder of his den open nine times outer ten! . . . Wants a bit ter watchin', 'e does! An' now trot up ter bed, the pair of yer."

She gave the parson a little push.

"I've got an important letter to write," said Harry, a little nervously.

"So have I!" said his wife, in much the same tone.

"Go on!" said Cookie. "At this time of night?"

"Don't bully me!" said Harry. "If it were three in the morning I should write it, so put that in your pipe and smoke it. Light your mistress up to bed, cook, and don't spill the candle-grease on the stair-carpets."

Both the lonely teeth gleamed in Cookie's suddenly smiling mouth. She picked up her candle-stick and turned to Mrs. Pemberton.

"Ain't he funny?" she asked.

For a moment, not because she thought it the least use, Helen tried to look dignified; but one glance at the quaint figure at her elbow sent dignity for the hundredth time to the rightabout. It was impossible to be dignified with cook. She was cook, and she had to be accepted as such or not accepted at all.

With a giggle Cookie went upstairs, spilling the candle-grease. In the morning when she found it on the stairs she would blame the charwoman, who never carried candles, or the parson, who invariably carried a lamp.

Helen blew a surreptitious kiss to Harry and followed her. Whereupon the parson tiptoed through the hall, down first three stairs then two, along the passage, and into his den.

As he opened the door of the dark room, a sound that was half whine, half yawn, came from a pile of cushions that had been flung into a cane deck-chair.

"You scoundrel!" said Harry.

He lit a couple of candles on his desk, and strode over

to the chair. On his back, with all his legs in the air, wagging the ugly stump of a tail, lay a rough-haired fox-terrier, with a grin of confidence and appeal on his whiskered face. By the look of the cushion, deeply indented, the dog had been snugly tucked in for several hours, and by the look of the dog the one really great desire of his life was not to be untucked at all, but to be spoken to in a cheery, manly fashion for a moment or two, given a very large biscuit, and left alone.

Harry knew all these things. Not for the first time by uncountable dozens had he found William Henry Pemberton, known to his immediate circle as Bill, in precisely the same place, in exactly the same attitude, at that time of night, instead of being sleeping lightly in his kennel by the side of the chicken run. And not for the last time would he find him there in precisely the same place, in exactly the same attitude, at that time of night, when he ought to be sleeping lightly in his kennel by the side of the chicken run. Harry knew it. Bill knew it. Nevertheless, as Bill quite expected, Harry stood over him with a threatening finger raised and scowling brows. And Bill lay on his back and stuck up his legs and wagged his tail and pretended to be very much ashamed of himself—as Harry knew that he would. The Lord knows how many times Harry and Bill had played this game.

“Oh!” said Harry!—“oh!”

“Oh, yourself,” said Bill. He stretched one hind-leg up and pushed Harry’s finger.

“Oh! so there you are. I see you.”

“That’s no news,” said Bill, grinning all along one side of his mouth. “If you can’t see with eyes like yours, you’d better give it up.”

74 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

"No cheek!" said Harry, holding up his enormous hand to strike.

"I say, go easy," cried Bill, putting his head down and showing the white of one eye. "Oh, look out! You never know. You might make a mistake and really hit me. Then you'd be sorry and I'd sulk. . . . Oh, chuck it, I say!"

"You pampered blackguard! You gentleman of no occupation!"

"What!" cried Bill. "No what? Who spends hours digging holes and gettin' his nose absolutely stained with earth? And who is always ready to rush like a streak of solid wind through any sort of grass after a stick? That's libel!"

Harry looked closely at Bill for a moment. "I detect insolence in your eye," he said. "The window's open. Get up, jump out, and pack off to your kennel. Go on! At once!"

Bill's tail slowed down, and stopped. Was this stern tone part of the joke or was it genuine? Could it be possible that his beloved master was out of temper and was going to forget himself? Good Lord!

Bill got up slowly and jumped down. With tail tucked in between his legs and head turned away he walked across the boards to the window, stood beneath it for an instant, waiting to give the tall man a chance to retrieve his quite obvious and totally unexpected loss of good behaviour, and then, as nothing happened, sprang up on the window-sill.

Harry guffawed.

Bill turned, dashed headlong at Harry, leaped up twice, and sprang back into the cushion.

"You are a rotter," he said. "You did that well. Catch me moving again!"

Harry bent down and gave Bill an affectionate punch.

"That's all right," replied Bill, with the whole of his body—"that's all right. And now, if you don't mind, I'll go on with my dream."

The parson took his dismissal meekly, and went to his desk. Sitting down, he collected a sheet of note-paper and an envelope and a fountain pen.

"Nineteen," he said softly—"nineteen."

"Eh? What?" asked Bill, looking up quickly. "Oh! I beg your pardon." He rose, turned round and round eight or nine times, and fell with a plop. Whereupon he heaved a loud sigh of complete contentment, and fell into a blissful sleep.

Harry dated the letter, and wrote, "My dearest."

"No," he thought, screwed the sheet up into a ball, and dropped it in the waste-paper basket. "No, that isn't true. Helen might see that. She's my dearest. I don't suppose it would hurt her feelings, but it might."

He made another start.

"MY DARLING LITTLE GIRL,—Not with ink, but with liquid love I am writing to wish you many happy returns of your birthday. Nineteen! Think of it! Why, in the twinkling of an eye you'll be no longer my little girl, but a woman, with your hair up, stuffed full of hairpins, which, being your father's daughter, you'll shed about the passages; with your frock right down to your heels—low heels, darling, if you love me, though I don't want you to be anything but a woman. Well, be nineteen. I don't care. There's no altering

you whether you're nineteen or nine or nine minutes. Whatever you are, you're Effie, our Effie, whom we love and are very proud of, and who we don't hope but know will do great things. I don't know what to give you. Being a healthy young person, properly brought up, of course you expect and shall have something. I can't give you a doll—you've already had twelve. I absolutely refuse to give you a writing-case—you've already had five. And as to a very swagger purse, your last year's one is in excellent condition. So, as you're nineteen, and therefore a person of vast age and great independence, with nothing to learn of life, I enclose a five-pound note. Buy something for yourself—furniture to put in your castle in the air—what you will. Replenish your golf bag—anything. All I ask you to do is to take with it and keep long after it has melted away, the great love and friendship and respect of your old chum and father,

“HARRY PEMBERTON.”

Having written this, with so much love in his ink that it was necessary to write several quite commonplace things to temper his emotion, the parson leaned back in his chair, and, with a smile in his eyes and a grave mouth, thought back.

He stopped at a night in late April nineteen years before. He saw himself pacing up and down the room in which he was now sitting, beseeching God, with all his heart and soul, to beckon the Angel of Death away from the bedside of the little woman who lay in the room above. He felt again the grip of anguish and fear, and trembled as he did so. He saw himself a cowardly and miserable figure, standing stock still

listening for a sound in the room above that might have something of hope in it. Again he heard a sudden brisk step across the room, pause for a moment, and cross back. Again, in imagination, he fell suddenly on his knees, and prayed for mercy. Again he rose and stood at the open window and looked out upon the sleeping night which shook under the throbbing notes of a nightingale. Again, dully, he watched the cunning, quiet movements of a cat picking its way on the path between the rose-trees, and again he felt the soft puff of wind upon his hot forehead and heard the martins, in their half-constructed nest under the eaves above his head, chatter in their sleep. Again he heard the latch of his door raised, and after a pause, in which he was too frightened to turn, felt the grip of a man's hand round his arm, and heard the words, "Mother and daughter doing well." And then his thoughts raced through the years, stopping tenderly to dwell on the abiding memories that crowded back—memories of a little golden head on his shoulder and a creased and dimpled arm round his neck; of midnight walks up and down his bedroom with a restless but precious bundle; of the first spoken word; the first attempt to walk; the first horrible duty of punishment; the trotting little figure, with wondering, dancing eyes, hanging on a finger; the first lesson; the first and last feeling of acute jealousy when the slight, beautiful figure with long brown legs sprang away from him and nestled in the arms of his wife; the great pride in the flying exquisite creature returning a difficult net ball; the great delight of looking up from his desk to watch the serious young face in front of him bending over an evening lesson.

78 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

"Nineteen," he said—"nineteen. God is indeed God."

Bill lifted an ear, and raised one eyelid.

Harry unlocked a drawer, hunted among a mass of heterogeneous papers for some minutes anxiously, discovered the five-pound note, and then folded it up in the letter and put them into the envelope. Before closing it he threw a kiss into the letter.

Taking off his shoes, he blew out the candles, shut the window softly, and bent over Bill.

' Good-night, old man,' he said.

"I thought you were going to forget to say that," said Bill. "Thanks! Good-night, Best of All."

Harry left his hand for a moment on the dog's warm head, and then shut the door and crept upstairs to his daughter's bedroom.

Into this sweet room he stole on the balls of his feet, feeling his way to the little table by the side of the bed. Upon this he slipped his letter, and bent over the pillow.

Through the slightly parted curtains a glint of moonshine came. Framed in a mass of rich brown hair he could see the clear lines of the girl's untroubled face. It was lying in the curve of a slim gleaming arm. The bedclothes had been flung back, and the young bosom rose and fell regularly beneath its dead-white covering.

Harry lifted the clothes, and placed them gently up round the girl's shoulders, whispering as he did so, "A happy birthday, little one." Then he made his way back to the door.

In the middle of the room he drew up suddenly and tightened his hands. "There!" he said to himself. "By Jove! I've put into that envelope the five

pounds I've been saving up to give Helen for a new frock . . . Dash it all ! This means that I shall have to keep the poor darling waiting for another month, and she does want a new thin frock so badly. . . . I told her I'd got it too, and she was going to London on Friday . . . She won't say a word when she doesn't get it, but how am I to know that she won't be hurt about it, and—she's a woman, thank God ! although the best of women—a little jealous ? What the dickens am I to do ? ”

Putting his arms out he made for the door. His hands touched something soft and warm, and closed upon her shoulders of his wife. He drew her against his heart, and held her there, mightily.

They stole out of the room together.

As the door closed the brown head bobbed up with wide-open eyes. A hand went out excitedly, and touched two letters and a little box.

“ You darlings ! ” breathed a voice—“ you blessed darlings ! Oh, what *is* in this little box ? ”

CHAPTER IX

THERE was a loud whistling in the bath-room and a splashing that might have been made by a grampus if it had found its way into the bath.

Helen heard it as she stood in front of her looking-glass, brushing her hair. She knew that the charwoman had polished up the brass taps of the bath. What did it matter? She would go in when the room was empty and rub them over so that the charwoman shouldn't be distressed by the spots upon their beauty.

Helen was thinking deeply as she brushed her hair. "I wish," she repeated to herself again and again—"I wish I had told him last night. I wish I had. He gave me that ring. It's the only ring he has ever been able to afford to give me. What will he say when Effie tells him that I gave it to her as a birthday present? Will he think that I've forgotten why he gave the ring to me, that all the sentiment and romance of our love is dead, that I love Effie more than I love him now? . . . Her nineteenth birthday! What else could I give her? I had nothing else. A ring means so much to us when we are nineteen. . . . But it was his ring. He rushed off to buy it the morning after he lifted me up into the chair and kissed me. It was almost the last money he had left. And when he put it on my

finger, he made me shut my eyes and guess what it was like. I never had had a ring before. How could I guess? . . . I must tell him."

She piled up her hair, and finished dressing, and went across to Harry's dressing-room.

"May I come in?" she asked.

A curious clicking noise came from the room. "May you come in? Of course not," said Harry.

Helen entered.

In a pair of much-washed white flannels and a vest, Harry stood two or three yards from the wall with that grave expression on his face that is worn by every man when using an exerciser. With both handles in his right hand he was going through bowling actions with great regularity and solemnity.

"Fifty-six, fifty-seven, fifty-eight——"

"Don't overdo it, Harry," said Helen.

"Fifty-nine, sixty! What a morning, eh? Sixty-one. Summer at last, eh? Sixty-two."

Helen fidgeted round the room, touching things nervously. "Any more golf stockings with holes?" she asked.

"Sixty—no—five. Sixty—don't think so—six——"

The door was flung open. Bill marched in, and with an air of well-simulated carelessness dropped a dead rat in the middle of the room.

"Hullo, you two!" said he.

"Oh!" cried Helen, backing with a shudder.

Harry let go the handles. Bill listened to the noise they made against the wall with a touch of irritation. He rather hated noises.

"Good man!" cried Harry.

"Last night," said Bill, "you said some rot about

82 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

my being a gentleman of no occupation. Don't let it occur again, please." He sat down and crossed his fore-paws.

"One of those beggars out of the barn," said Harry. "Isn't Bill a nailing good ratter!"

Bill blushed. "Pardon me," he said, lifting his back leg and turning back his head to meet it. "A slight irritation."

"Ask him to take it away," pleaded Helen. "It may not be dead."

"Draw it mild," said Bill. "Still, as you women have no sporting instincts——"

He picked it up, shot a wink at Harry, and trotted out. Harry burst out laughing.

"I believe he understood me," said Helen.

"Understood you, my dear? Of course he did. Seen Effie yet?" He asked this question anxiously. Helen's five-pound note had been taking the most extraordinary shapes all night.

"No, not yet," said Helen. "It's very early still. Oh, Harry, here are two pairs of stockings in the most dreadful condition!"

"Don't bother about them, dearest. I hope I shan't use stockings again till October. This weather has come to stay. Do you want to speak to me about anything particular?"

"No," said Helen—"no, I don't think so."

"Well," said Harry, getting into his shirt, "I do want to say something particular to you."

"Oh, Harry, you know!"

"Know what?"

"I really didn't mean . . . I mean I hadn't forgotten. I love your ring as much as ever I did. More, much

more. It's because I love it so much that I gave it to Effie for her birthday. Oh, I do hope you won't be hurt!"

A slow smile crept over Harry's face. "What a pair of children we are!" he said. "My dear, I've been worrying all night because, having nothing else to give Effie, I slipped the five-pound note I promised you into my letter."

"I'm so glad!" cried Helen.

"Have you been worrying all night about the ring?"

"I believe I have," said Helen.

Harry was silent for a moment. The smile became very tender. He picked up one of his wife's little hands and kissed it.

"My sweetheart," he said, "it takes a big daughter to show how much we love one another, doesn't it? I'm glad you gave her the ring."

"And I'm glad you gave her the money. My old dresses will wash again beautifully."

CHAPTER X

WITH the ring on her finger and the note in her purse Effie had risen with the martins and had gone out quickly into the fresh morning.

Like all healthy young things, in the spring of their years, she expected that everything would look different because it was her birthday, that every one would be nicer than usual, that even the weather would recognise the occasion and be on its best behaviour.

The weather, it seemed, knew perfectly well that Effie was nineteen. Already, as she made her way into the garden, the sun had begun to drink up the dew that hung upon the rose-trees and rested upon the tips of the grass. All the birds had long been up and doing, singing, chirping, and piping as they went, utterly careless of the rules of time, paying no attention to any leader's beat. Each one sang as he chose, and the clash of sound was tremendous.

Effie went over to Bill's kennel. She laughed when she found it empty, and, creeping back into the sleeping house, opened the door of her father's study and came upon Bill waiting eagerly, with pricked ears and cocked tail, a burst of welcome waiting in his throat. Effie bent down quickly and held his nose tight.

"Not a sound yet, old boy," she whispered. "Father and mother are tired. Wait till we get to the river."

"Right oh!" gurgled Bill. He twisted free, gave a shake that began with his ears, went along his white body and slipped off the end of his tail, and made a bolt at top speed. Effie followed, and the two ran under the pergola at the side of the old house, across to a wild patch of grass under three old elm trees—dodging the amazed heads of a new family of red tulips—up the wide path, and out upon the green. Bill leading, away they went over the hills and heights and hollows of the wet green to the road, and so to the river, the girl's hair flying behind her like a trail of golden smoke.

At the foot of the mill bridge, under which the water tumbled and hurried, Effie stopped and looked up at the two great chestnut trees which stood, sentry-wise, one on either side of it. The hot sun of two or three days had set light to all the candle-like blossoms, and the trees resembled huge Christmas trees ablaze.

Catching up a stick, the tall, slim girl stood on the edge of the mill stream. Her dark eyes were sparkling, the nostrils of her short du Maurier nose were distended, and her lips were open and showed two lines of small white teeth. Her breath came pantingly, and her young round breasts rose and fell quickly beneath her white jersey. There was something very boyish in the freeness of her attitude and the strong way in which she had planted her feet.

Bill, who had gone skying along the bank of the stream, leaping cuttings, making furious dashes at bunches of last year's leaves that were not in the least like rats, suddenly turned, saw the stick in Effie's hand held high above her head, and came flying back.

"Hold on!—hold on!" he gurgled, almost choking with excitement. "Don't chuck it till I get there. Oh, don't chuck it!"

He was in time, made a tremendous leap, and fell backwards into the water.

"Bill! You idiot!" cried Effie.

"That's all right—that's all right. There's water down my ears, but I'll see to that later. Now, no humbugging. Really chuck the stick. Good!"

He ran and leaped and then swam. Caught by the stream away went the stick, twisting and being hurried and harried and carried away, and away went Bill after it, with only his ears, eyes, and nose visible.

Standing with her head thrown back and calling out encouragement at the top of her voice Effie watched the dog make several snaps at the stick and finally catch it between his teeth. But, did he turn and swim back against the stream? Not Bill. He landed several hundred yards away, shook himself violently, and came trotting up, grinning from ear to ear.

"Hot work," said he. "By Jove, such a stream! Great. Do it again."

Effie did it again and yet again, with one more for luck, and then, while Bill, getting more and more filthy, began digging into old rat holes, she sat on the bridge over the churned stream, with her long legs dangling and her hands spread out on the warm bricks, and let her thoughts go running away with the water.

Several times she looked at the ring gleaming on her finger with a feeling of immense pride and importance. Somehow, far more than the fact that she was nineteen, it gave her a sense of age and experience and weight. The five-pound note, carefully folded up, and tucked

into the middle pocket of her purse, added enormously to this new sense. Never in her life had she possessed so much money of her very own. What should she do with it? A hundred shillings! . . . A hat for mother, with the things to trim it. Oh, splendid! Or, better still, why not get her that ripping flower bowl she had liked so much at Rexbridge! It would look absolutely right on the piano crammed with roses—and the roses would soon be in. She would get both. Yes, she would—both. That would leave her enough to buy a box of a dozen spotless Colonels for father, and—could she afford a new aluminium-headed driver for herself?

Birthdays are awfully jolly, she thought. She never had had quite such a really surprising birthday as this. No, not quite, although all that she could remember had been most satisfactory. Nineteen! It was a big total, she never thought she would have got to it so quickly. All the same, it would be ages before she was really a woman. How splendid to be a woman, utterly independent; free to do all the big things that she had mapped out—write books and make her name; marry, if there was a man to be found who was really fine and wonderful, like father. She didn't want to hurry. The sooner she became a woman, the sooner father and mother would become old. She should simply hate father and mother ever to be any different. For the matter of that she didn't think they would ever be. They mustn't, and that was all about it.

As she sat and watched the water and let her thoughts run riot a new and unexplainable feeling of unrest and dissatisfaction crept over her, a great yearning for something she could put no name to. What was

it? What did it mean? She always had been very happy. She was very happy now. She wanted nothing that she had not got. No girl alive had such a father and mother, so beautiful a home. But—but surely life meant something more than the regular, pleasant routine of duty and pastime that hers was made up of? Surely there was something more for her to do and be? All that she could remember of her nineteen years had been the same. One Sunday was the same as next Sunday and next. Every week-day of one week was the same as every week-day of every other week. Were all the Sundays and all the week-days going to be the same for another nineteen years?

She sprang off the bridge, angry with herself for thinking such utterly new things as these. She shook herself and threw back her hair and put the ring to her lips. She held her face up to the sun and drew in a long breath and looked round affectionately at the peaceful landscape, every tree, hedge, and bend of the river of which she had always known.

She flung this queer new feeling off and called Bill and swung back home, singing. Nevertheless, she knew, try as hard as she might to disguise the fact, that she had made a startling and frightening discovery. A corner of her heart was empty.

CHAPTER XI

THE birthday had been everything that a birthday should be. The whole house had given itself up to Effie. In the morning Harry Pemberton had played a full and determined round with his birthday-girl. The links had been in splendid condition. It was true that a couple of hundred sheep wandered about, respecting neither the greens nor the tees ; but all the trees and hedges were in their first freshness, there was very little wind, and there were no impatient people to press. On her handicap Effie claimed a stroke a hole, but although she had not foozled any of her drives, and was putting like a book, she was beaten by three up, on each hole by a putt.

Harry was too good a sportsman not to play all out, even although he would have liked Effie to win the match, and Effie was too much the daughter of her father not to know that she was not good enough to win. She had done her best, and enjoyed the game tremendously. In the afternoon Effie led the way into Rexbridge, she and her father and mother on bicycles, Bill mostly on three legs. The fourth had been rendered temporarily disabled in a battle royal on the green, just before lunch.

A lurcher belonging to one of the working men who was waiting to see what Tariff Reform would do for him before he was fool enough to look for a job had made one or two would-be smart remarks that Bill, naturally, resented. He gave the bounder-dog a severe lesson, but received a stone from the lurcher's master. The fortune of war. No well-bred, wise dog mixes himself up with the village riff-raff.

There had been a wonderful cake for tea—a special effort of Cookie's. It was large and high, and stood on frilled paper. The whole of its top was white, and trickling over it in red sugar letters was this emotional legend: "Manny happy returns of the day to hour dear Miss Heffy." And after tea Harry opened the croquet season upon the newly-cut lawn. The white petals of apple-blossom fell in little showers, and peppered its surface.

It had been an entirely satisfactory day. Effie had had the undivided attention of her usually uncome-at-able father and mother, every minute of whose time, on ordinary occasions, was devoted to others. In itself this marked the day out as unique. No cloud had hidden the sun. All the hours had been golden.

One letter had been delivered in the evening. Cookie had examined it minutely. It bore the London postmark, and carried a large black crest on the lip of the envelope. But Harry put it on his desk, and refused to allow it to take any of his attention from the birthday-girl until she should be in bed. After dinner he sat at the piano and thumped an easy accompaniment to his old school and Oxford songs, which he sang at the top of his voice, and in the extra hour which Effie

demanding, described for the hundredth time some of the epoch-making events of his University career to the wide-eyed girl and her little, smiling mother.

At eleven o'clock the birthday-girl's day came to an end, and after giving and receiving a big hug, she and her mother went up to bed, and Harry made for his room, for the last pipe. Upon his desk lay the unopened letter which was to make Effie's nineteenth birthday a day which would never be forgotten by any soul at the Vicarage so long as they remained members of the human family.

Harry read it, and dashed upstairs to his wife's room, at least four steps at a time. Helen was in bed, and Effie, in her night-dress, with her hair in two long plaits, was kneeling on a chair at the foot of the bed, with her arms on its wooden rail and her bare feet poking out.

She was telling her mother all the odd things that had gone through her brain in the morning as she sat on the bridge in the sun. Her voice was pitched low, and it vibrated as Harry's did when he was deeply moved. There was much of her father's vivid eagerness in her face and eyes as she made, what seemed to both women, to be something in the nature of a confession, but there was also in her face and eyes a suggestion of wistfulness and puzzlement that had never been seen in her father's.

Harry plunged into the room like a south-east gale, and sat on the bed. It groaned beneath his weight.

"Now then, you two," he said, "listen to this; you remember my saying that I should have to take to cramming a boy or two to get some money?"

"If you will give nearly all we get away, of course we get into debt," said Helen.

"That's what you said then, and what you've been saying for years," said Harry. "We are slightly in arrears with the local tradespeople, and I was beginning to worry. I was thinking of writing to one or two of my old pals who have got boys old enough to undergo the process of being stuffed with all the useless and idiotic nonsense that our rotten system of education demands—though I was afraid I should stand no chance against the professional crammer who swarms everywhere. I hadn't written, but here is an answer."

"Harry!"

The parson lifted his face up for a moment and shut his eyes.

"Yes," he repeated, "here is an answer."

He held the letter near the lamp, and read:

100, Grosvenor Square.

"DEAR SIR,—

"A mutual friend, Lord Thorganby, has given me your address. Let me come at once to the reason of my troubling you with this letter, and ask you if it will be convenient for you to receive my second son into your house. Frankly, I ask you to do this because, under existing circumstances, I cannot have him in mine. Though his father and his well-wisher, I have neither his confidence nor his obedience, and I feel that my attempts to put him on the road along which I desire him to walk have failed, and are likely to fail.

"He was educated at Eton—or at least underwent

the so-called educational training of that public school for the prescribed period. I ought to tell you that his record there was a bad one. If it had not been for his excellence in the cricket field the Head Master would have rid the school of his unruly presence. Later he went up to Oxford, to the House. The independence of the undergraduate that is, to my mind, of inestimable value to the shaping of a young man's character, did not, as I hoped, steady my son. On the contrary, his career at Oxford was meteoric but short. He was sent down in the middle of second year, not for reasons of a disgraceful nature, but, I am told by his tutors, simply because it was found that he had a constitutional inability to conform to rule and order. He is now under the parental roof, getting on for twenty-two. He is in no sense of the word either a degenerate or a bad-hearted young man. So far as he has permitted me to make his acquaintance, he seems to me to be a young man of many excellent parts who could, in the proper hands, be shaped into a good citizen and a fine fellow. I confess that I believe him to be proud, sensitive, utterly uncontrollable in a bearing-rein, headstrong, self-indulgent, generous, very lovable, but so easily influenced that he is as likely to drag my name into the gutter if left with his present friends, as he is likely to be lifted above the ordinary level of human creatures if he falls into such hands as yours.

"If agreeable to yourself, my plan would be, as a last resource, to send him to you theoretically for the purpose of reading and being coached in those subjects that he would have taken at Oxford, practically in order that your gift of influencing those who come

under what our friend Lord Thorganby calls 'your spell,' may save my son from becoming a member of the regiment of dissipated, shift, useless, and harmful creatures into which so many of our younger sons are drifting. This would be a matter of some grief to me. I am well aware that I am asking you to undertake a great responsibility, and one that may, I am afraid, put you to infinite trouble and annoyance. But as my son will not hesitate to pack up and leave you within forty-eight hours if he does not take a liking to you, it will be one that will not last long. I trust that this may not be the case. If you will permit me to enter at once into the question of fees, I am prepared to offer you, with my extreme gratitude, the sum of three hundred a year, paid quarterly in advance. May I look for an answer to this letter in course of post?

"Believe me to be, dear Sir,

"Yours faithfully,

"ABERLADY."

Harry read this letter with ill-concealed excitement. Nevertheless he rolled the old-fashioned phrases over his tongue with the touch of pompousness that was evidently characteristic of the writer.

"Three hundred a year!" said Effie, underlining every word.

"Three hundred a year," said Harry. "An eighth part of that will pay all my arrears, and the rest will build the new room for the club."

"Three hundred a year," repeated Effie.

Helen sat up and bent over the letter. "Utterly

uncontrollable in a bearing-rein, headstrong, self-indulgent," she read aloud, with a note of warning in her voice.

Harry gave a short laugh. "That description fits ninety-nine per cent. of men who are worth their salt," he said.

"Who is Aberlady?" asked Effie. "It sounds like the name of a place."

"It is," replied Harry. "Of a place in Scotland. The father of our young mustang is Lord Aberlady. He is a fine old fellow who married rather late in life. He holds an important post in the Cabinet, and is one of the old school. His eldest son is in the Army, doing awfully well."

"I hope he will take a liking to you, father!" said Effie. "Do you think he will?"

Harry's hand closed over one of his wife's. "Do *you* think he will, sweetheart? Or will he pack up and leave us at the end of forty-eight hours?"

"I know," said Helen quietly, "that he will be a great responsibility, and put you to infinite trouble and annoyance. . . ."

"Mother!"

Harry looked at his wife sharply.

"For just half an hour," she went on. "After he has smoked his first pipe with you in your den, he will tear up his return ticket to London."

"Ah!" cried Effie.

Harry threw back his head and gave a big laugh. "By Jove!" he cried, rising and striding excitedly up and down the room. "Think of being able to build on that room. In my wildest dreams I didn't hope to do it for three years. May I write and say send

him down by return of post? He won't put you out at all?"

"I am thankful," said Helen.

"What will Cookie say?"

"Oh, blow Cookie!" said Effie.

"Then I'll go and write at once." Harry turned at the door, "I wonder what sort of a golfer he is?"

"He plays cricket," said Effie.

"By Jove, so he does!" said Harry. "He must play for East Brenton. All I hope is that he bowls. We're frightfully short of bowlers. But—where will he sleep?"

"I'm afraid he must have your dressing-room, dear," said Helen.

"Right oh!" said Harry. "I'll bag the little room next to Cookie's. Three hundred a year!—three hundred a year! . . . I'll send for Jackson in the morning and get an estimate for the new room."

He blew a kiss to his wife and daughter and bolted downstairs. They heard him go into his room and bang the door. They heard him call out to Bill and break into a song. They heard him draw his chair up to his desk. Then all was quiet.

Effie gathered up her brush and comb, bent over her mother and kissed her, and went slowly to her bedroom.

Helen waited until her door was shut, rose quietly and knelt down at the side of her bed.

And so the birthday-girl's birthday slipped off the calendar as all the other days in all the other years slipped off it. All the same it was to be remembered by every one in this loving and striving household so long as they had memories. To an Indian alone in

the primeval forest a broken twig across his path may mean the beginning of trouble. A man may take a short cut home and find himself on the operating-table of a hospital. Providence often puts a large potato in a little pig's way, and just as often, with what seems to be the spirit of devilish mischief, fills it with poison.

CHAPTER XII

TWO letters, one from East Brenton to London, and the other from London to East Brenton, underwent the ordinary process of collection, despatch, and delivery. The first one, short and to the point, accepted a proposal. The second one, also short and to the point, gave thanks, and stated that Archibald Graham would leave Paddington by the 5.35, and would arrive at East Brenton at 6.3. "No doubt he would be met."

"No doubt at all," said Harry. "I will meet him."

Cookie grumbled—Cookie always grumbled. But, assisted by the parson, his wife, his daughter, and Mrs. Stagg from Old Farm Road, a good woman blessed with short legs but a long tongue, the dressing-room became a bedroom, and the little room over the kitchen, next to Cookie's, and four of Harry's strides from the bathroom and five from his bedroom, received his scanty wardrobe of old but affectionate clothes, a large assortment of boots and shoes of all ages, many razors, some characteristically sulky, some of excellent temper; the exerciser, and fifty or thereabouts framed photographs of school and college groups, without which no genuine dressing-room is, or can be, worthy of the name.

A desk of oak, with many drawers, newly made up to pass for its great-grandfather, was bought at Rexbridge and plumped down in front of one of the windows in the parson's den, and much clean paper was spread in the empty chests and shirt wardrobes and cupboards in the now dethroned dressing-room.

All being ready, even to a large bowl of wallflowers on the dressing-table in the new bedroom, already spoken of as Mr. Graham's room, the Vicarage did its best to wait unexcitedly for the arrival of the 6.3.

Harry was at the station fifteen minutes before time. He ordered a cab, and satisfied himself at the same time that the cabman's wife had derived great benefit from several bowls of Cookie's mutton broth. He found out, on his way up to the arrival platform, that one of the night porter's hands was going on as well as could be expected, and that Mr. Johnson's hay looked like being better than last year. Half-way up the steps he was delighted to be told that Mrs. Melville's coachman's son had got a job as groom at Rexbridge, thanks to his kind letter, and on the platform he heard with great pleasure that it was the station-master's firm opinion that the Government could not last another year.

The train put into the station exactly on time. In an instant the quiet platform was alive with people, nearly all of whom had a word and a smile for the parson, who had taken up a position by the chocolate and wax vesta machine. One after another these people, natives of East Brenton and natives of Rexbridge who changed at East Brenton, passed the ticket-collector and disappeared. Harry's keen eyes searched for the figure he had drawn in his imagination, and

searched vainly. He had pictured Archibald Graham as a shortish, square-set, roguish-eyed young man who would wear a House tie and trousers turned up over Cornmarket socks and brown shoes, who would drag out a bag of golf clubs, and soon be surrounded with masses of luggage, stamped A.G.

The platform was empty but for porters and station-masters, and the guard waved his flag. Then, and not till then, the door of a first-class smoking-carriage opened slowly, and with an air of bland interest a tall, slight, straight-backed, perfectly-groomed boy got out and handed a small suit-case to a porter. His head, underneath a straw hat set at a slight angle, was small, and his hair worn long without looking *outré*. An angelic expression sat on refined, well-cut features, and a half-smile of great charm hovered at the corners of a beautiful mouth. His skin was tanned, and the whites of his grey eyes were almost blue. He stood six foot high, and every inch of him was as hard as nails, yet he moved with a certain unconscious grace and looked about him with an air of aloof courtesy that was curiously pleasant.

He saw Harry instantly without appearing to look at him, and drew off his right glove. Going quietly up to him, he touched his hat without respect.

"Mr. Pemberton?" he said.

Harry had watched him with interest, but without supposing for a moment that he was the man he had come to meet. His preconceived idea had been so completely different.

"Yes," he said. "Are you Graham?"

"Please."

Harry held out his hand. "How are you?"

Archibald Graham's long, thin hand was swamped.

"It's very kind of you to meet me," he said.

The train left the station.

"Not a bit. Where's your luggage?"

"I gave it to the porter."

"Is that all you've brought?"

A slight colour rose into the boy's face. He looked ingenuously into Harry's eyes. "A telegram will bring the rest," he said.

Harry's laugh rang through the station. He put his arm round the boy's shoulder, and marched him to the gate. "We will pull up at the post office and send it."

"Er . . . Thanks very much," said Graham.

There was a note of slight irritation in the boy's voice, and a glint in his eyes of a fighting spirit.

Harry wheeled round and faced him, to the astonishment of the ticket-collector.

"If not, my dear fellow," said Harry evenly, "there's a fast train back to Paddington due now. What will you do? Take it or send a wire?"

The boy's lids fluttered nervously for a moment, and his eyes seemed anxious to find other things than Harry's eyes to look at. But Harry's eyes held them, and the man and the boy faced each other silently for a moment. There was nothing either of sarcasm or authority in Harry's eyes, only irresistible friendliness and sympathy. With a sort of quick examination the boy's eyes ran over Harry's big, square figure.

"I'll wire, please," he said.

"Thank you!" said Harry.

Not his words but his tone made the boy's eyes contract quickly as though something sharp had pricked him. He could not define it as humbleness or servility.

It seemed to him to be a note of simplicity, of nobility, of gratitude.

Uncomfortable, and yet with eagerness, Archibald Graham followed the man whom he knew well enough had been appointed his gaoler out of the station and into the cab. The small suit-case faced them on the opposite seat.

"Home," said Harry.

The word seemed to the boy to be the right one.

CHAPTER XIII

THE cab, with its tireless wheels and rattling windows, made so much noise, that after yelling a few commonplaces at the top of his voice—receiving a smile and a shrug of the shoulders from the boy—Harry made no further efforts until the post office was reached. Harry stopped the cab.

Graham got slowly out and stood looking at the little old house, which was nothing more than a couple of workmen's cottages, with both its front rooms turned into the shop and its door altered to suit its requirements. The windows, stuffed with jam-pots and sweet-bottles and oranges in their papers, piled up in heaps and mixed up with notices as to recruiting and gun licenses, and lost property, were small. The shop itself, low of roof, with small rooms leading off, in which glimpses could be caught of antimacassared chairs, fish in glass cases, and china primly arranged on brackets, was so crammed with every conceivable sort of pickle, jam, sweet, soap, black-lead, sugar, treacle, and biscuit that it was almost dangerous to move. One pot or tin disarranged would bring all the rest to the floor in an overwhelming heap. Lard and

cheese stood on the low counter, cheek by jowl with a stained tin ink-stand, a small piece of blotting-paper, a packet of telegraph forms, and three bottles of boot polish. There were no pens to be seen.

Over the door there was a board upon which the words "East Brenton Post Office, Mrs. Hobhouse, Postmistress and Grocer, etc.," were painted.

Graham turned his head over his shoulder towards Harry. "Delightful!" he said. "Rising—what?"

"The house itself is something over three hundred," replied Harry, with an air of pride.

"No wonder it begins to look a little fagged," said the boy.

He went in, down one step. Harry ducked and followed him.

An old lady behind the counter bobbed. A younger woman with a pleasant shiny face and much loosely-done hair examined Graham carefully, with an air of distinct approval.

"How are you, Mrs. Hobhouse?" Harry sang out. "Telegraph forms on the shelf there, Graham. Pencil hanging."

"Oh, right, sir!" said the boy.

"I'm nicely considerin', I thank you, sir," said the old lady in a thin, sweet voice. "My eyes give me trouble, in fact there isn't much that I can see now, but my legs and hands are still of use, so I mustn't grumble."

"When you begin to grumble, Mrs. Hobhouse," said Harry cheerfully, "we shall be able to send twelve words for nothing."

Both women laughed deferentially. The older one

blushed with pleasure. "I'm thankful that things are as they are, sir, never havin' expected the same. As I heard you say twenty and more years ago, sir, the grumbler don't deserve the gift of life. If I may make bold enough to say so, sir, you look nicely."

Harry took down a bottle of lemon drops and put three into his mouth.

It seemed absurdly paradoxical to hear the telegraph machine ticking in that old shop.

"I say," said Harry, "don't forget to ask for your golf clubs and cricket bat."

"I have," replied the boy, handing in two forms.

"Good!"

Harry laughed when he saw two forms. "Any reduction for a quantity, Miss Wimley?"

Both women laughed again. So did Graham. "I have asked them to send down a good many things," he said, "and also to telephone breaking an appointment I had made for——"

He stopped, and the colour rushed into his face.

"To-morrow?" asked Harry, with a smile.

"No, to-night."

Harry did not say anything. He perfectly well understood that by making an appointment for the night of the evening upon which he arrived at East Brenton the boy had made up his mind that he would not stay at the Vicarage for longer than a few hours. Also he perfectly well understood and appreciated the magnitude of the compliment the boy paid him by breaking the engagement.

Graham felt one of Harry's big hands close round his arm for the eighth part of a minute. The gratitude that was conveyed in this silent action and the sympathy, rather than the look of triumph that he half expected to see on the face of the man by whom he had owned himself beaten, had a queer effect on this very ordinary boy. He marched out of the shop quickly to hide the fact that his underlip was trembling. Harry waved his hand to the women, and followed.

At the door of the cab Graham turned upon Harry suddenly.

"Would it put you out," he said, "if the cab took my case to your place and we walked? I want to speak to you."

"Not a bit," said Harry. "Go on to the Vicarage, give Cookie the suit-case, and tell her that Mr. Graham and I will be home to dinner."

The cabman slanted his head and whipped up his horse. Harry took the boy's arm and fell into step. The boy put off his slow, graceful stride and set a quick, brisk pace. Together these two, both tall, one nearly three inches taller than the other, without a word, but in perfect sympathy, stumped over the green, leaving the Vicarage on the left, along a dusty hedge-lined road that led down to the mill and the mill stream. The boy, with his chin held high and his eyes fixed straight ahead, evidently bracing himself up to do something that he had never done before, paused nowhere. He turned to the left when they came to the mill, and took the path that ran alongside the curling stream, willow swept, and led past the cricket field, with its wooden shed and huge roller—the pride of the club. The trees which lined up in front

of and behind the hedge, old and young, straight of limb and sap-full, twisted and bent, and almost ready for the destroying winds, were in their first luscious green. At their feet the grass grew high and straight, dotted with the yellow faces of celandines, alive with the blinking eyes of daisies, while in the ditch the suspicious and quick-tempered nettle elbowed the limp-backed sorrel that had already overgrown its strength.

Graham pulled up on the narrow, wooden bridge that stretched across the wide and shallow river. Leaning his arms on its white rail, he examined the peaceful, flat landscape that stretched itself, house-less, in front of him. The stream, wide, quiet, but alive, moved up the middle, drawing the sky into its embrace, golden with the sun, reflecting the thousand stiff young arms of the willows that lined its left bank. On the right bank, once a thin white twisting path was passed over, there lay a field green with the heads and shoulders of sturdy oats, cut off from another field and another by thick level hedges until it touched the horizon which lay, sea-wise, at the feet of a line of upstanding poplars. To the left fields of ripening hay, patched so thickly with buttercups that a yellow liquid might have been spilt upon them; then a hedge, irregular, tree-interspersed, and then field and field and again field, green and golden and silver where the soft breeze turned the grasses up. But on this side the horizon was blotted out by thick woods which cut the skyline like fret-work.

From all sides rose the chirping and piping and twittering of birds, the clear, throaty note of the thrush loudest of all. Away in the distance, but clear and

108 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

in perfect time, the solitary call of the cuckoo came and stopped, and came again.

The boy spoke. His tone was quiet, but there was more than a suggestion in it of resolutely controlled emotion.

"I want to lay everything out straight with you, sir," he said, "at once."

"Go ahead, old fellow," said Harry.

"And I'm going to ask you to answer some questions bluntly if you don't mind, without any attempt to spare my feelings."

"Right," said Harry.

"Was I packed off to you by the Gov'nor as a waster?"

"Pretty well like that."

"He sent me to you much as a drunkard is sent to a rescue home?"

"Much in the same way."

"With a detailed list of my misdoings at Eton and Oxford?"

"Pretty detailed."

The boy's voice became a little shrill, and he gripped his hands together.

"That's how I was sent to Eton—under suspicion. That's how I went up to Oxford, still under suspicion. Knowing that I was labelled suspicious goods, that I was watched and expected to break out into some rottenness, spoilt me at Eton, and ruined my chances at Oxford. I don't say that I'm not rotten. I don't say that I'm not a mass of detestable characteristics. But the one sure way of bringing these things to the top was to suspect me, and to expect these things of me. I've had nothing to live up to, and I've done

stinking things everywhere out of bitterness and anger. I want you to know this. I want you to know my side of it all, and I want to ask you for God's sake not to suspect me. Do you?"

"No," said Harry.

The boy turned and pulled himself up. "Ah!" he said.

Harry held out his hand, and the boy grasped it.

"As we are in a sort of way rubbing noses and becoming friends," said Harry, "I'll just say something too. I don't know your father personally. From what he's done for the country he's a big man. But I could see from his letter that he didn't understand you. He's always treated you as a man should treat a man, not as a man should treat a boy. He began by believing that you had no sense of honour and must be taught it, when he ought to have given you credit for possessing as great a sense of honour as he possessed, and put you on it. As to your horrible misdeeds at Eton and Oxford—my dear, good chap, when and where is a man to commit the harmless, necessary horrible misdeeds of his green youth except at Eton and Oxford, unless it's at Charterhouse and Cambridge? Your father and those asses at Eton and Oxford—all of 'em the last men in the world to have anything to do with boys—all of 'em book-stuffed, theorising apes, only fitted to make rules for the conduct of dead things—have made you self-conscious. Eh? Come along. All that's over. You and I are brothers, just two ordinary good sorts ready at any moment, but for the sympathy of each other and of our other Brother, to break out and go arm in arm with nature to the gutter. I'm going to give you anything that

you would like to have if I can, and you're going to do the same for me. When we stand on our hind-legs, and have the infernal bumptiousness to say that we feel we need nothing more, Providence, always on the look out for the braggart, will put in one straight from the shoulder and hit us very hard. Now come home, and I'll toss you who has the bath."

CHAPTER XIV

ARCHIE GRAHAM was washed and dressed and ready for dinner before Harry Pemberton had finished whistling and incidentally bathed.

It was a very different Archie Graham who made his way down to the hall of the Vicarage. He felt like a creature, labelled wild, that had been released from the chain by which he had been attached to institutions the whole of his life. He was not merely free. That meant nothing. He had frequently, from very devilry, broken the chain. He was trusted. He was to be treated like a man by men, and no longer as a suspect by gaolers. It was a glorious feeling, this new and startling sense of freedom. For the first time since he could remember he could hold his head high. He was able to be natural, to throw aside the sham naturalness, the acted naturalness that incessant suspicion had bred in him. He had no longer to go about with the horrid knowledge that he was under surveillance. He was to be respected, and therefore he could respect himself. He was believed in. He could therefore believe in himself.

The whole of life assumed a new aspect, a new perspective. He had seemed to himself, hitherto,

to be the one hideous, out-of-proportion figure in the landscape, so self-conscious had his abominable training made him. Now everything had suddenly sprung up round him, and he had dwindled to his proper size. The change was abrupt, startling, extraordinary, and "Oh, my God," he said to himself, "how delightful!"

He stood on the threshold of the old house, and looked out across the garden and meadows and thin white line of road, hedges, and poplars to the setting sun. He did not put any of his thoughts into grandiloquent order. He just felt, with a wave of intense relief and thankfulness, that with the setting sun the last of his ugly days was disappearing.

He looked at the slowly sinking red globe triumphantly, almost defiantly, and he clenched his fist and set his teeth. "The Gov'nor shall see," he said to himself. "I've got my chance! I've got my chance—at last!"

Bill trotted round from the kitchen garden. On seeing a stranger on the top step, without a hat and looking very much at home, he stopped and examined him coldly.

"Hullo, young fellow," said Archie cordially.

"How de do?" said Bill, with the proper politeness of a well-bred dog. His manner was still chilly.

"Come up and have a jaw," said Archie.

"Hullo," thought Bill, "no side about this cove anyhow. One of the right sort, evidently, and a pal, I take it, of Best-of-All's. That's good enough for me."

He mounted the steps, put two feet on Archie's leg, and looked up into his face, with an immensely friendly tail.

"Good for you, old man," said Archie, patting his head. "You know a rat when you see him, eh?"

"Eh, what?" laughed Bill.

"But you never, never make dashes after a cat?"

Bill got down. "Oh! look here," he said. "Go easy. You're putting your foot into it. I'm no giddy and foolish pup."

"I'm sorry," said Archie.

"Say no more," said Bill. "I see that you know a dog when you see one. I'm glad you're here. You'll be able to throw a stick or so for me. I'm just going up to have a look at Best-of-All. So long."

He trotted in and upstairs. Archie heard Harry's rich, vibrating voice and Bill's sharp treble.

"Well, you haven't taken long to wash yourself," said a voice behind Archie.

The boy turned quickly, and caught Cookie's one good eye smiling at him.

"No," he said. "How do you do?"

"Oh! don't go out of your way to be perlitte ter me. Did you think I was Mrs. Pemberton?"

"No. I know who you are. You're the one cook on earth."

Cookie burst out laughing. All the same, her vanity, of which she possessed the ordinary quantity, was extremely tickled. "Don't know about that," she said, "I'm sure. Tell me after you've tasted my mint sauce."

She passed into the dining-room, leaving a trail of chuckles after her.

"Queer old bird," thought Archie. Under the closed door of the drawing-room trickled the soft notes of a piano. "That's Mrs. Pemberton," he thought. "I'll

114 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

introduce myself. Everybody seems to be glad to see me here."

He opened the door quietly, went in and drew up quickly with a catch in his breath.

Seated at the piano he saw a tall, slim girl with a sun-kissed oval face, large eyes full of a restless spirit, and a mass of rich brown hair patched with streaks of copper. Her long bare neck, set divinely upon her shoulders, was slightly bent over the keys. Her fingers came down firmly, with a sense of strength upon them, and the music she wrung forth was not soft and restful, but full of rebellion and unrest. Absorbed in the air, she did not see Archie enter, but played on, unconsciously reflecting in her face the questions the music flung into the air.

It was a wild, wistful, angry tune that she played, full, it seemed to Archie, whose keen and sensitive imagination was always set alight by music, of the cries and fluttering of wings and impotent, painful rushes of a bird caged up and longing to stretch its wings in the great real world, even if they were broken there.

Archie understood instantly, and instantly knew, with the intuition that was the one womanly thing in his nature, that the player did not understand. His eyes saw beyond the seated girl, in all the security and peace of a home shining with happiness. The quiet monotony, the small daily duties, the unexciting pastimes that had become irksome, the awakening ambition, the growing desire for something real and big, he read in her attitude, in her eyes, in the look of her fingers.

Effie looked up suddenly and caught Archie's eyes.

Her fingers fell meaninglessly upon the keys. A discord hummed through the piano and died away. For a moment neither spoke.

Then Archie went forward boyishly. "By Jove!" he said, "that's what I call playing!"

Effie rose and gave a little shy laugh.

"I beg your pardon," said Archie, suddenly nervous and stiff. "I'm Graham. I'm afraid I disturbed you."

"I was only playing to amuse myself," said Effie. "I'm Effie Pemberton," she added.

The boy stretched out his hand in his best conventional manner. "How do you do?" he asked.

"I'm very well, thank you," replied Effie, in the same tone. Then she sat down to the piano. Archie stood on the rug in front of the old-fashioned fireplace.

"I've met the dog and cook," he said, "and admired the view. It makes a Leader picture from the steps. Are you—er—are you the Vicar's sister?"

Effie showed two rows of small white teeth, and her eyes danced merrily. "No, I'm his pal," she said—"I mean his daughter."

"You couldn't be one without the other," said Archie. "He's a—man."

Effie leaned forward eagerly. "Then you *aren't* going back within forty-eight hours, as your father said you——"

She stopped, and grew red to the roots of her hair.

Archie looked at her sharply. "Did father say that I should?"

"I'm so sorry I said that," said Effie. "It slipped out."

116 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

"It doesn't matter," the boy answered. "I suppose what father wrote was that if—what a rotter I was! I'm different now, at least I hope so!—I didn't cotton on to your father I should chuck East Brenton."

"Yes," said Effie.

The boy stood silent for a moment, thinking. Then he laughed. "Um," he said, "that's what I should have done. But it so happens that I like your father a million times better already than any man I've ever met—and that's only a tenth part of what I'm going to like him."

"I knew you would," said Effie.

"I'd have to be deaf and blind not to. I wish I'd known him since the beginning of the world." He laughed. "That's my egotistical way of saying 'since I was born.'"

"I know," said Effie simply.

Archie laughed again, and Effie wondered why. He caught her eye, and knew that she didn't know, and was glad. He was not going to be egotistical to-morrow. He was not going to be lots of rotten things to-morrow—not if he could help it—now that he had a chance.

CHAPTER XV

HARRY played the devil's tattoo on the gong, and then flung open the drawing-room door.

"Effie—Archie," he said. "Archie—Effie."

"We've met," said Archie.

Bill entered.

"Archie—Bill," said Harry.

"We've met, too," laughed Graham.

Bill grinned. "No need for an introduction," he said. "I pass him."

Cookie poked her head in.

"What is the good of my being punctual when you let heverything git cold?"

"Punctual!—punctual!" cried Harry. "Look at the time, you Arch-humbug! You're half an hour late."

"Not by my clock," said Cookie.

There was a tremendous laugh from Harry. Every string of the piano vibrated. "You put your clock back to the time you want it to be," he said. "And you've done it every meal-time for twenty years. Deny it if you dare."

Cookie sniffed.

"Mr. Archibald Graham—Cookie," said Harry.

118 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

"We've met, too," said Graham.

"Well, you've not wasted much time, have you?"

"No," said Graham, "not a moment."

Helen entered.

"Am I to take it that you've chummed up to my wife as well as to every other member of this house?"

Graham looked across at the little, neat woman, whose face was still pretty, and whose eyes still sent out the expression of kindness and trustfulness that had won her the friendship and drawn forth the instant confidences of men and women, children and dumb animals. Then he went up to her and took her hand and bent slightly over it.

"Yes," he said. "Please."

Helen took his arm, and led the way into the dining-room.

With a beaming smile the parson watched them cross the hall. Then he turned to Effie.

"Well," he whispered, "what do you think about him?"

"I've not had time to think about him yet," she replied.

"But do you think you'll like him?"

"I didn't have to think about that," she said; "I liked him at once."

"Good! That's exactly how he affected me. Come along or he'll guess that we're exchanging notes about him."

He put his long arm round the girl's waist, and led her into the dining-room. Bill followed, a little sulkily.

"Um," he said to himself. "This is the first time that Best-of-All has left any room in which I have

been without saying something, however idiotic. I shall make it dashed unpleasant for our young friend if he's coming between me and——"

Something got into his throat. The mere idea of such a contingency pained him so frightfully that he could not even finish the thought.

He saw a big hand go down and heard two fingers make a flipping noise. He was against the hand in an instant. The fingers touched his head caressingly.

Then Bill ducked and took up a position under the chair, with his chin down on his paws.

"A pretty average sort of rotter, that well-bred, wired-haired dog Bill," he said to himself. "My eye! Ought to be shot——"

A peaceful sigh came from under the chair, a tail wagged six or seven times, and a dog quoted Browning. "All's right with the world," he said, as plain as print.

Much the same line floated through the head of the boy. He was so surprised and delighted with the simplicity, the absolute unaffected friendliness of his reception, the extraordinary way in which he had been made to feel that he was one of the family, that his presence in the house was as delightful to every one in it as it was to him to be there, that he continually found himself hoping anxiously through dinner that it was not all a sort of dream. And yet this boy was twenty-two!

If he had been at home he would have been sitting opposite to his father at a long table in a large, old-fashioned room hung with dim oil paintings in faded gilt frames, casting generally antagonistic, sometimes appealing, glances at the gaunt old man at the head of the table. He would have listened impatiently to

his father's obvious attempts to make conversation, and believed himself to be examined curiously, discontentedly, during the many painful silences. In all his father's simple personal questions and halting efforts to win affection he would have read suspicion and distrust, and would have become so nervous with a desire to get out of the range of those steady keen eyes, that the length and solemnity of the meal would have seemed more unendurably long than ever. He would have replied to questions evasively, shiftily, although having, mostly, nothing to hide. The bitterness and the farcicality of such parental relations would have put upon his face an expression that his father would interpret, with pain and irritation, as a desire to escape to some foolish, perhaps disgusting, companionship. And he would have made his escape as soon as possible, and fled from the presence of the man whom he had grown to look upon as cold, hard, dictatorial, the man whose every look, remark, and action seemed to make it more and more deadly certain that he was ashamed of being his son's father. In all probability he would have lingered about the motherless drawing-room wistfully, not daring to look at the portrait of the beautiful patrician face of the woman who had died in giving him birth ; would have hurried up, as he had hurried up so often, to his lonely den and flung himself face down upon the rug in front of the fire, and either cried like a child or thought out for hours, eagerly, some plan for getting away from home. His desire to enlist in a cavalry regiment, or to try and obtain employment in a newspaper office, or to ask his father to send him to Canada, invariably came to nothing. He loved his father and admired him,

and could not face the selfishness of leaving him alone always in that cold, silent house.

If some accident, some disaster, some wave of sympathy, had caused either this father or this son to overcome the reserve that each had allowed to grow up like a stone wall between them, that house would have been cold and silent no longer.

As it was the father dined alone behind his wall, cold and not a little miserable ; while the boy opened like a bud in the sunshine, in the warm and friendly atmosphere of East Brenton Vicarage.

CHAPTER XVI

BEFORE going off as usual to the club, with his wife and Effie, Harry gave the boy the run of his den, placed at his elbow a large tin of sound smoking mixture, lent him Bill to keep him company for three hours, and told him to make himself happy with any book that took his fancy.

"We won't begin work to-night," said the parson. "For one thing you haven't got your books. For another, I don't know what you're going to read for. And anyhow, there's plenty of time in front of us. If you're not too sleepy when I get back at about ten minutes past eleven we'll smoke a pipe together and settle half a dozen of the world's problems before bed. What?"

"Right, sir," said the boy. "I suppose I——"

"Well?" encouraged Harry.

"Could I be of any use to you at the club? I can play a fairly sound game of pills, and—and, as a matter of fact, I can sing about two dozen so-called comic songs. Would they make anybody merry and bright?"

"Get your hat, old fellow," said Harry, "and bring your pipe."

"Really? You're sure that I shan't be a wet blanket?"

"Anybody who can sing a comic song, my dear fellow, is worth his weight in gold."

The laughter that rose from the group round the piano in the club sitting-room, in which the women worked with Helen or looked through the illustrated papers, gradually drew the men from the billiard and card-tables. The boy's third song was sung to a crowded room. Harry led the chorus. The Salvation Army man followed him, and presently the painter, the plumber, gardeners by the half-dozen, two sweeps, three milkmen, several butcher boys, a railway porter, a couple of grocers, and any number of bricklayers, factory hands, farm labourers, and odd jobs made the rafters ring.

A billiard match was then arranged between Archie, by this time a popular person, and the scratch player of the club, and the excitement, as the hands of the clock made their way towards eleven, both players standing in the eighties, became intense.

Archie played well, but was out of practice and nervous. He made a plucky fight for it, but was eventually beaten by three points. He was greatly cheered by the members of the club, who were doubly pleased. First, that their man won the game and upheld the honour and glory of the club. Second, that the "nice young feller" who had no side and sang "as well as a pro., if not better," had very nearly won.

Archie walked home with Mrs. Pemberton. Helen had a way inherent and unconscious—it amounted to a gift—of drawing almost instant confidences from nearly every one who might be with her for fifteen minutes. Well under the first fifteen minutes of meeting her for the first time the boy had told her without

knowing that he had told her that he had never known his mother.

Whatever prejudice against him she had formed after reading Lord Aberlady's letter, at once and finally faded out of her mind. "Poor boy," she thought, "how could he be expected not to make mistakes? He never had a mother."

Already, in her quiet, determined, and unobtrusive way she had begun to mother Archie, and as is the way with genuine mothers, born mothers, irresistible mothers, her first great anxiety was to discover whether he was wearing wool next his skin.

She approached the subject warily, because, from a long experience, she was well aware that on the question of underclothing all male creatures are touchy and impatient.

She said, "The nights are cold still, aren't they?"

"Are they? Yes, I suppose they are."

"Oughtn't you to be wearing an overcoat?"

"Good Lord, no!" said the boy. "This is the middle of May."

"I know, but till May be out cast not a clout."

"No dictionary that I've ever hunted through knew anything about the word clout."

Helen gave a silvery laugh. "So like a man to hide behind a dictionary. You all know what clout means. And, after all, perhaps an overcoat doesn't really matter if vests and things are warm and thick."

Being a motherless man, Archie fell into the trap. "Warm and thick!" he echoed. "The whole art of a vest is to be soft and thin!"

He sneezed.

"God bless you!" cried Harry from behind.

"I shall examine your things to-morrow," said Helen quietly. "My husband once talked about art in connection with vests, and very nearly had pneumonia. He has worn wool for twenty years, eight months a year, and wouldn't be without. Effie shall ride with you to Rexbridge to-morrow. You can get beautiful woolies there for eight and sixpence apiece."

"Not for me, thanks!" said Archie. He sneezed again.

"God bless you!" repeated Harry.

"Thank you," said the boy. "I will buy a large stock of wool vests for you to give away."

"You're very kind. And you will keep six for yourself."

"To look at!"

"No, to wear."

"I couldn't. They'd drive me mad."

"They'd stop you sneezing."

"I like sneezing."

"You'll soon get used to them."

"I'll never, never, never——"

"Yes, to-morrow—to please me."

The boy laughed. "I want to please you, please," he said. "But——"

"Then that's settled. Is that settled?"

"Y—yes," he replied.

They found Bill waiting for them at the gate. "I would have come to meet you," he said, "only I daren't trust the house alone with Cookie."

They found Cookie waiting for them at the hall door.

"Rain ter-morrer," she said.

"Oh, bless you, no!" said Harry. "There's no ring round the moon!"

126 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

"Can't 'elp no ring round the moon. What about my feet?"

Harry and Helen followed Cookie into the house. Bill followed Harry, yawning. Effie stood on the top step and looked out at the sky that was alive with stars. Archie stood by her side, and breathed in the scented air.

"How quiet it is," he said.

There was a pause. From the distant road there drifted the sound of whistling. A bird in one of the pollarded elms was piping throatily.

"What time do you usually get up?" asked Effie.

"What I used to do doesn't matter now," he answered. "What time do you get up?"

"I shall be out to-morrow at seven."

"So shall I," said Archie.

Effie held out her hand. "Good-night," she said.

"Good-night," said the boy. "By Jove, you *do* play the piano stunningly."

"And you sing awf'ly well."

There was another pause. No whistling came from the road. The bird in the pollard was asleep. Far away in the distance the sound of a train shunting was carried on the breeze.

The wistful, restless expression had gone out of Effie's eyes.

"Well—good-night," she said.

"Well—good-night," said the boy.

CHAPTER XVII

AS Archie put his cap on the bench in the hall and watched the girl go elastically upstairs, Harry stumped up from his room, in an old Zingari blazer, loading a pipe. He locked the door, put up the shutters, and taking the boy's arm, led him through the hall down two steps and then three and along the passage to his den.

Two candles were burning in tall, brass candlesticks. They threw a flickering light on the untidy, comfortable desk, with its red-bound reference books in the small shelves on each side, on the fat muddy brown ink-bottle, on a large tin of tobacco with a bright red label, on a calendar in a blue frame, on a hard-looking letter-case of a green tint, and on the red curtains that hung over the window. They also lighted up the card that hung over the fireplace, the white stone round the fireplace itself, the brass boxes with their hammered figures in quaint attitudes, and the many-framed prints and photographs that hung on the walls behind and to the right of Harry's chair. The rest of the room was in shadow.

The window at the end of the room was open, and Archie could see the starry white faces of clumps of blossoming saxifrage at the feet of the rose-trees. He

128 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

could also see Bill's white back against a red cushion that lay upon a big deck-chair.

Harry lit a pipe and handed the tin to the boy.

"Load up, old fellow," he said; "bring any chair you fancy into the light, and talk or listen, just as you like."

Archie started his pipe, chose a chair with a straight back and arms, brought it forward, sat down and looked at Harry.

The parson's fine, strong, clear-cut features stood out against the candle behind him. There was a clump of grey hair at his temples, and many deep lines in his face. His tremendous shoulders seemed almost too big for the back of his chair, and his large, sensitive, long-fingered hands rested on the desk in front of him.

"What made father send me to you?" asked the boy. "Providence or luck?"

"I don't believe in luck," said Harry. "If I believed in luck I shouldn't believe in Providence. An old friend of mine, Bunny Thorganby——"

"Oh, by Jove, Lord Thorganby! He was dining with the Gov'nor one day last week—Thursday, I think. I didn't like him, but I'll make up to him for this, if I can."

"Why didn't you like him?"

"Oh! he's on the wrong side of politics."

Harry laughed. "You've made up your mind which is the right side, then?"

"I've been a Conservative ever since I can remember," said the boy.

"That settles it," said Harry gravely.

Archie looked at him sharply, caught the twinkle in the parson's eyes, and chuckled.

"I've not been ragged," he said, "since I came down—that is, was sent down from Oxford."

He paused uncomfortably, determined to give the parson every chance to ask him why he was sent down, as he had a perfect right to know. He could not suppose that he would care to harbour under his roof a man who might have done something discreditable, or unsportsmanlike.

Harry struck a match. "Loads of men," he said, between his puffs, "are sent down who don't deserve such drastic treatment."

"I did, though," whipped in the boy.

"Glad to hear it," said Harry. "If a man knows that he deserves punishment, he doesn't grumble when he gets it, and, ten to one, it's a fine thing for him. Punishment only has a bad effect on the wretched beggar who doesn't deserve it, and gets it. If he's not a pretty strong chap, he either develops into a criminal or deteriorates into a sloppy creature with a perpetual grievance."

The boy blew out several big clouds of tobacco and braced himself up.

"As I want to start fair with you, sir," he began hesitatingly, "and as I couldn't possibly even dream of staying in this—this awf'ly kind house under false pretences, I must tell you exactly why I was sent down, unless father told you, as I hope he did."

"No," said Harry, "your father didn't tell me, and you're not going to tell me. I don't want to know. I'm absolutely certain that whatever it was that you did was not done deliberately. I'm not your judge, my dear chap. I'm your friend, and I believe in you. What you have got to do is to forget all about the

incident. You've had your knock-out blow, and you're on your feet again. The thing's over. Your pipe's out."

He handed the boy the box of matches.

"Thank you," said Archie, clearing his throat.

"Oh! by the way," said Harry, "are you a rich man? I mean, are you going to read with me in order to earn a living?"

"Yes," said the boy.

"That's all right. A man who doesn't have to earn his bread and butter and golf club subscription misses the joy of life. What are we reading for?"

"The Bar."

"Oh! excellent. Have you passed the Law Prelim.?"

"I just scrambled through."

"Better and better. I'll look out all my old books. Some of 'em will be useful."

"Did you read for the Bar, sir?"

"Yes," said Harry, "tremendously hard. I was going in for the Bar and politics at one time."

The boy threw his eyes over Harry's big figure admiringly.

"What made you chuck it and go into the Church, sir?" he asked respectfully.

Harry rose abruptly. He bent over the empty grate and knocked out his pipe. Then he looked at the boy.

"I may have to tell you one of these days, Archie Graham," he said; "but I hope not. . . . Now then, boots off, and when you come to the stairs, creep. Good-night, old chap."

"Good-night, and—and thanks most awf'ly."

For some time after the boy had gone Harry stood with his arms hanging down, his lips pressed tight together, looking back over the rampart of dead years to the time when he, like Archie Graham, had been twenty-two, when, given health and a day, he could have conquered the world. And as he thought back, no expression of regret soured his lips, but a smile was brought to them by one in which thankfulness mixed with determination.

"No," he said aloud. "No, Bunny, old man. No. If I can be a decent parson, I shall be perfectly satisfied Good night, Bill."

Bill opened one eye and cocked one ear. "Good night, Best-of-All," he said.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT was half-past six when Effie left the bathroom. Bare-footed, wrapped in an old dressing-gown of her father's, she made her way swiftly and softly back to her bedroom and stood in front of the glass.

In it was reflected a beautiful, eager face, glowing with health and the joy of life ; large dark eyes alight with innocence and unclouded by grief, remorse, regret, or disappointment.

The two long plaits of her hair were twisted into a sort of crown on top of her small head and pinned there. Two or three curls strayed over her forehead.

With her hands on the simple dressing-table, she stood and gazed at her face in the glass. Her examination was long and critical, and unsatisfactory. When she turned away finally, it was with a gesture of impatience.

" I do *wish* I was better looking," she said.

She flung off the dressing-gown and her nightdress, and caught up the handles of the elastic exerciser that was fastened to the wall. Facing into the room, she stood with one foot planted firmly some inches in front of the other, and brought her arms slowly forward over her shoulders, sent them out as far as they would

go, and let them be pulled slowly back to where they started. The sun, which flooded the room, fell warmly upon her rounded slim limbs, cream coloured. Her face, neck, and hands to the wrist were tanned. She looked like a young Diana, the perfection of maidenhood, and yet almost boy-like in her strength and slightness.

Glowing and breathing quickly, she went steadily through half a dozen different exercises. All her movements were exquisitely graceful, every attitude she fell into well balanced. Suddenly, hearing a quiet step on the stairs, she dropped the handles and got swiftly into her clothes, undid and brushed her hair vigorously, with a smile playing round the corners of her lips, and put on a straw hat. Carrying a pair of thick golf shoes, she hurried downstairs. The aroma of cigarette smoke came to her nostrils.

Archie Graham was standing at the garden door, and Bill was sitting in the sun, yawning.

"Hullo!" said Archie.

"Hullo!" said Effie.

"Hullo!" said Bill.

Effie sat down on the last stair but one and put on her shoes.

"Golf shoes," said Archie. "Are you playing nine holes before breakfast?"

"I hadn't thought of it," said Effie. "But I should love to, if you would."

"Rather. Frightfully. The only thing is what about clubs?"

"Oh! take a handful of father's."

The boy made a face. "Um. Would he mind? I'm always a bit funky of using another man's tools."

134 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

"He never minds who uses them—all except his pet driver and ancient mashie."

She tiptoed into the parson's den, took the two clubs out of the bag, and handed it to the eager boy.

"Do we take Bill?" he asked in a whisper.

"Take!" scoffed William. "That's a good word, my eye!"

"Oh yes, rather!" said Effie. "Not a soul will be out except the green-men. Ready?"

"Spoiling."

"Take!" repeated Bill, as he dashed out and round the house. "Ha, ha!"

The boy and girl followed, side by side, in step, where the paths permitted, single file where they didn't.

The sun was warm, but there was more than a sting in the south-east wind which gave exhilaration to the morning. Lilac and laburnum waved in it, flags, yellow and terra-cotta wallflowers, now going off, white pansies by the hundred, and rose-buds tipped with colour, bent before it. A mother blackbird had brought down one of her more precocious youngsters upon the lawn. While she ran from place to place to hunt for worms, the wobbling baby, full but fluffily fledged, shook its wings, with wide-open yellow beak impatient for its breakfast.

"How far?" asked Archie, as they turned out of the gate.

"We'll start over there—two minutes' walk—at number six, short hole, bogie three; play number seven over the line, a ripping hole, ditch in the middle, and *awful* grass on each side; go straight on to eight, nine, and ten, which brings us back to this side of the line; take eleven, twelve over the mill stream, a drive I

nearly always fozzle ; thirteen and fourteen, winding up nearer home than we shall be when we play at six. That all right ? ”

“ Great ! ” said the boy.

“ Come on, you two,” cried Bill, a hundred yards ahead. “ You talk too much.”

“ What’s your handicap ? ” asked Effie.

“ Twelve.”

“ So’s mine.”

“ But I haven’t played for a month, not since I was sent down.”

He referred to that episode without the slightest hesitation. Harry’s broad hand had put the whole thing once for all into its place. It was a punishment. He deserved it. It was over. It had already become merely an indelible impression, from which to date things.

“ Do you want anything ? ” asked Effie.

“ Oh no, please ! I only said that in the usual golfing spirit—to cover any absolutely feeble punches that I may make.”

“ Golf brings out all sorts of funny tricks,” said Effie.

They left the corner of the green, and stumped shoulder to shoulder along the dusty road.

“ I used to play with a man at Oxford—rotten links !—who drove a long, straight ball ninety-nine times out of a hundred. His form of conceit took the shape of exuberant admiration for his opponent’s drive. ‘ By Gad ! ’ he’d cry, with his hand on the peak of his cap and head bent forward, ‘ that’s a corker, an absolute corker—long and in a bee line of the pin. Thirty yards farther than mine. One of the best drives

136 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

I've ever seen at this hole.' And when one got up to the ball he was always a good twenty yards in front. Then he'd look very sweet and bland, and open his pale eyes quite wide and say, ' By Gad, that's not me, is it ? All that way in front ? ' "

Effie's laugh was caught up by the breeze, and thrown about like the petals of a rose.

Archie shot a glance at her face. " Heavens ! " he thought, " she's like a dream come true."

They came to the mill bridge. Several men with dirty faces were unloading a huge unwieldy bale of scraps of paper from a cart. The wind snatched at the loose pieces mischievously, and sent them skimming over the bridge and into odd corners. Bill chased one of these and worried it into small bits. Every hair on his tail showed how much he wished it were a rat.

Over the bridge they came into a road lined on the left with magnificent elms, and cut off from the links by a ditch and a well-clipped hedge.

" Here we are ! " cried Archie.

" No ; that's the fourteenth. We wind up here. We start at the foot of the hill. Look at those naked sheep. How glad they must be to get rid of their wool."

" Till May be out cast not a clout," murmured the boy, with a slightly rueful smile.

Effie looked at him and laughed again. " Mother's been at you already," she said. " I knew last night on the way home when you sneezed."

" Yes," said the boy, wondering why he should feel so delighted that she had remembered his sneezing, " you've got to conduct me into Rexbridge to fit myself out with some ghastly woollen vests."

" Mother's pets," said Effie, climbing over a gate.

She swung up to the sand-box, pulled out her iron, dropped the bag on the well-cut turf, and teed up. "Bogie three," she said.

Her swing was deliciously easy. The ball went off low, rose slightly, fell on the edge of the green, and ran up to within ten yards of the pin.

"You'll beat bogie," said Archie.

"Hope so," said the girl. "Watch the wind. It's over the line. It's out of bounds the other side of the wire."

"Right."

Archie drove, gracefully, easily, evenly, punching hard when he came within three feet of the ball. It rose high against the wind, was carried round, very white against the blue sky, fell some yards behind the pin, and rolled off the green into the rough.

"Hard luck!" cried Effie.

Archie picked up her bag and handed it to her, caught up his own and stumped off by her side.

A small white speck moved up and down rapidly on the edge of the stream away to their right. It was Bill, half way down a hole.

"It's ripping here," said Archie. "I vote we play every afternoon—when you've got nothing better to do."

"I've never got anything better to do. I've never got anything to do. I mean, father and mother are busy all day long, and of course I help them as much as I can, but—it's—oh, it's most awf'ly quiet here!"

Archie took another look at the beautiful face. To come across such a face in such a place as East Brenton was like stumbling upon a Reynolds in a little frame-maker's shop.

138 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Effie pulled out the pin and put her feet, heels together, near the hole. Archie played a mashie stroke. It was too hefty and the green was hard. The ball bounced to the far edge of the green.

Archie laughed. "Can't do it under four. You're a certain two. I retire."

"No, no! Play. Father never gives up anything."

"No," thought the boy, "or he'd have given me up after that letter from the Guv'nor."

He took careful aim and putted. The ball was on the hole the whole way, and dropped in with a yell from Archie.

"Well putted, sir!" cried Effie. "Our pro. couldn't have done it better. Now see me foozle."

She went swiftly to her ball, took her line, with one eye closed, got up and putted. The ball ran round the lip of the hole and remained outside with the impishness of its kind. Archie picked it up and gave it to her.

"Little blackguard!" he said. "He's in league with my pill. Awful rotten luck!"

Effie's teeth gleamed. "And you'd have given me that!"

"Now where?" asked Archie.

"Over the line. Bad rough to the left, bad rough to the right—out of bounds in the pond; a maddening ditch three-quarters of the way, and a very sporting green down in the hollow."

"Now I know," said Archie. "Thanks!"

"The lady's tee is on the other side. So will you go?"

"Oh, right!"

The boy chose rather a heavy black-headed brassy

and teed low, was slow up, hit the ball fair, and had the enormous satisfaction of seeing it carry the line, miss the telegraph wires by a foot, and go straight up the course. It dropped on the pretty within, so it seemed, thirty yards of the ditch.

"Never saw a better," said Effie. "We shall have you winning the medal."

Glowing with satisfaction, the boy followed the swift-footed girl across the line, watched her tee up, and saw on her face a look of grim determination.

Her ball was a good one, dead straight, long and low.

"Neck and neck!" said Archie.

"I hope so," said Effie.

Bill came up. His nose and front paws were black and caked with wet earth. "Can't think why you two want to muck about with a couple of rotten little balls," he said. "Ever so much better sport chuckin' a stick in the mill pond for me."

"You muddy imp!" said Effie.

"All right," said Bill—"all right. No cheek. Must do something, you know."

He followed until he came to a mole-hole, when he returned to work.

"Will a mashie take you on to the green?" asked the boy.

"Wish it would. I daren't risk it. I'm going to use my pet lofter."

She did, topped the ball, and saw that abominable splash rise as it fell into the water.

"Hard luck!" said Archie.

"No," said Effie with a smile. "Feeble play. I deserved it."

140 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Archie played with a mashie, and laid his ball on the green.

"I can see you worrying father!" said Effie.

"Does any one or anything worry your father?" asked the boy.

"No. Do you know what he would have done if he'd been here?"

"Tell me."

"Whooped so loudly that those crows would have trembled in every limb."

The boy fished out the ball. Effie got in a beautiful mashie shot, and lay dead a club's length from the hole.

"Hot stuff!" cried Archie.

"Yes, but I'm two better."

"I shall want 'em," said the boy.

His putt fell short. He putted again, and ran over the hole.

"Rotten!"

"A half, I *think*. . . . Yes. . . . Great game, isn't it?"

"One of the best. Two halves. Your honour still. Now where? This short one?"

"Yes, but it's full of surprises. Over the hedge, out of bounds. Grass long, lost ball. Cutting to the left, with frightfully brown water. Bunker, a perfect beast. If over and too long, another bunker; and if over that and the screen, fast river and good-bye ball."

"You're an absolute Baedeker," said Archie.

"I've played on the links ever since I was five."

"Hundreds of years ago! Good, indeed!"

Her ball carried the bunker and fell on the edge of the green to the right.

Effie gave an irresistible gurgle of delight. "First time I've ever done that. My pet spot is in the sand. I wish I'd done that on my birthday."

"I should be glad to do it once in a thousand years," said the boy. He let go his iron, and his ball rose and rose and rose, and dropped and dropped.

"Over—no—yes—no!"

Bunkered.

"I think that's enough," he said.

"Oh, why?"

They fell into step. The dew wetted their ankles. A black-bird rose in front of them, and chuck-chuck-chucked into the hedge.

"I'm one of those feeble-livered creatures who funk all bunkers, whether they're on a links or out in life," he replied, hitching his shoulders. "I've turned up many an exam. paper for want of backbone."

"Shall you ever play with father?" asked the girl.

"I hope so."

"Then you'd better have a go for that bunker. He loves bunkers."

The boy dropped his bag, seized a niblick, smote mightily, mounted again, and again fell back, stood still for a moment and rolled his eyes, and attacked it again, coolly.

"Over!" cried Effie.

The boy heaved a sigh. "When you're busy," he said, "I'll come out and practise bunker shots till I'm black in the face."

Effie laughed. Archie did not join her.

As he followed her, he knew that he had guaranteed

to undertake something he had never before attempted. "We'll see," he thought, "now that I've got a chance."

And so on these two went, from hole to hole, one a hole up on the other, and then all square, both dimly aware that the game was making them know more of each other and more of themselves than a hundred talks and walks, a dozen close introspective searchings, as is the way of the Royal and Ancient game.

Archie won the match by a putt, and as he put back the pin and pocketed the ball, the mill hooter made the day hideous.

"Half-past eight," cried Effie. "Breakfast now on."

Without another word she whistled for Bill, tucked her bag under her arm, and went off at a run. Archie did the same. They climbed a five-barred gate, got into the road, and made for home at the double.

Harry was reading the paper on the steps. "Aha!" he said, "who won?"

"Archie," panted Effie, "by a putt."

Helen, seated at the breakfast-table, heard the Christian name, and as she poured out the coffee a little smile trembled on her lips.

CHAPTER XIX

FROM that pre-breakfast game Archie was " Archie " to Effie, and Effie was " Effie " to Archie. Through beaming May, and well into a capricious and disappointing June, they played the same nine holes every morning before breakfast, wet and fine, and every fine afternoon they played tennis when Harry could not spare time to go round against their best ball, giving both half a stroke.

In the morning from nine to one, and in the evening from eight to ten-thirty, the boy worked, eagerly, enthusiastically, but with immense difficulty. He had got out of the habit of working. He had fallen into slack methods, done grudgingly only the minimum of what had to be done, and never taken himself by the scruff of the neck and forced himself to do anything that was irksome. The public school system had offered him no encouragement to do otherwise. There had been no one in his life to lead him, only dozens to drive. He was a boy who could be led anywhere, driven nowhere. The consequences of this system and his own rather self-indulgent nature were that, when finally he came under the magnetic influence of Harry Pemberton, eagerness and enthusiasm and a hungry desire to make up for lost time were at first

constantly warring with the ingrained habit of restlessness and a discouraging inability to settle at anything that required staying power.

He suffered, too, from the ability to do many things well without taking trouble. All outdoor games came natural to him. He could make a good show at fives, cricket, golf, tennis. He had a splendid seat on a horse. He drove well, shot and fished better than most men of his age and far greater practice. Indoors he was equally all round. He played a good game of cards and billiards, sang songs without effort and in a charming baritone, and he played anything quite delightfully on the piano that he could pick up by ear. The things that did not come easily he gave up. His tendency was to give up everything that required working at. In consequence, although he did many things well, he did no one thing extremely well. He was a Jack of all trades, a master of none.

Harry acted upon him as a moral tonic. He gave him a wordless sympathy at the moment when the boy needed it most. His understanding raised him out of moral and physical despondency. He brought to bear upon the self-distrusting boy the hourly influence of strength, endurance, and optimism. He put him instantly on better terms with himself, he cleared his mind of morbid fear, of self-conscious shiftiness, and he attacked with an unseen, unfelt knife the trick of posing into which he had been driven.

Harry knew well enough that most of his influence would have a mere effervescent effect upon Archie Graham, in the condition in which he found him, but for the almost pathetic eagerness of the boy himself to make it lasting. And it was this eagerness that he set

himself quietly to keep alive in all its freshness. He filled the boy's quick receptive mind with pictures of the things that only expert knowledge could achieve. He discovered the latent and uncultivated ambition that lay, moss grown, at the bottom of the boy's nature and fed it hourly. He did not fall into the psychological error of starting the boy off at the top of his stride. He began by holding him back with the gentlest hand. He broke him in by easy stages to discipline and regularity, and took as much personal interest in the boy's work, as though he himself was cramming for the Bar.

He read the boy no moral lectures. He never permitted him to think that he recognised in him anything that was weak or unstable. The boy found himself placed on a level with the parson. Instead of lecturing, Harry not only gave the boy the run of his house and the unwatched companionship of his daughter, but he confided to him many of his parochial troubles, and sought his advice and assistance.

By this means he planted in the boy the seeds of self-respect and self-reliance, made him unconsciously realise that life consisted of something more than the gratification of ego, and gave him the sense of perspective of his own troubles that very soon made them dwindle when compared with the troubles of others.

By teaching the boy to look outwards, he began to break him of the fatal habit of looking inwards. He encouraged a healthy egoism by setting to work to stamp out a morbid introspection.

He did not aim at making the boy perfect. Only angels are perfect, and they pay the penalty for being perfect by being angels. Nor did he endeavour to make the boy a professional in work, discipline, self-

146 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

reliance, or moral strength, before he was an amateur. Nor did he ever permit himself to become the teacher, the master. He started as the friend, and remained the friend.

By the end of June Archie Graham began to find discipline and regularity rather pleasant. He began to discover that his work was interesting for its own sake. He ceased to attack it from a feverish desire to please the parson.

When the first emotion which Harry's unquestioning trust had stirred up in the boy's soul had quieted down, his feelings for Harry became dog-like in their devotion. Pemberton was the first man who had given him his head, the first man in whose charge he had been placed who had never once regarded him with suspicion. This, apart from his admiration for the parson's great, kind, breezy personality and magnificent sportsmanship, won his whole-hearted love and affection.

And so everything went well in the Vicarage. The boy was happy, hard at work, hard at play, opening out like a long-unwatered plant that had fallen into the hands of an appreciative gardener.

Helen and Harry, who liked the boy as well for what he lacked as for what he would attain, were happier than ever, especially as the workmen had begun to build on the new room to the club. And Effie—well, Effie was happy too. Although she was not yet aware of it, the boy had filled the empty place in her heart.

In order, perhaps, to show the boy that he could not expect to forget in a little over a month all that he had learned in something like fifteen years, Providence arranged an incident to teach him humbleness, a lesson that Providence is particularly addicted to teaching.

Archie received a letter from a friend who had gone into the Army and who had returned to London from India on leave. He was asked to lunch and see a polo match at Hurlingham. He was keen to see his friend, and he put the case to Harry.

"My dear fellow," said the parson, "of course go. Put in a rattling good day, cart up your evening clothes, and take your pal to a theatre. Here's the latch-key in case I'm in bed when you come back to-night. Or perhaps you'd rather sleep in London?"

"No, no, rather not. I'll be down by the 12.5. Thanks awf'ly."

After playing his usual nine holes with Effie before breakfast, the boy changed, packed his bag, and marched off to the station with a ten-pound note in his pocket—and his spirits at summer heat. Effie walked with him. He was going two hours earlier than he need have done, because he wanted to do a little shopping. He had worn all his ties several times. It was imperative that he should replenish his stock. The problem of socks had also to be solved. He had none that would do really well for a polo match.

He confided these big questions to Effie. Woman-like she treated the matter with levity.

"I've never seen you in the same tie or the same socks twice," she laughed. "I should have thought that your stock of both was endless."

The boy turned his large eyes upon her with a look of whimsical reproach. "You never should rot a man's innocent pleasure," he said gravely. "The very moment a really decent sort loses interest in ties and socks he has either lost the joy of life or committed a felony."

They were passing the forge. The milkman's white pony was being shod in the smithy's yard. The smell of singeing hair smote their noses. Effie's rippling laugh brought a smile to the surly face of the milkman.

"Where do you lunch?" she asked.

"At the Cavalry Club."

"How exciting." She had visions of tall, slim men in full Hussar or Lancer uniform, and heard the clamping of horses.

Archie saw from her expression that her exclamation was not sarcastic, and thought suddenly how very different this girl was from the affected young people he had been in the habit of meeting.

"And when will the polo be over?"

"Oh! I should think about half-past six."

"Then you'll be able to catch the seven o'clock down! That's splendid. We can get dinner over quickly, and have just one set at tennis."

"I should love it," said the boy. "But the thing is that I have arranged to take Winstanley to a show."

"What sort of show?"

"I dunno. I shall leave it to him. If he feels adventurous enough to risk a dull evening we shall do a theatre. If he doesn't feel strong enough to risk that we shall go to the Empire, I suppose."

"Then when *will* you be down?"

"By the last train, I'm afraid."

"Oh!" said Effie. "Then I shan't see you again until . . . when?"

"Seven o'clock to-morrow morning. You took my number down this morning. I'm aching to get a little of my own back."

Effie made no answer.

They turned off the old road, upon which the Council had been experimenting with a solution of tar, naturally unsuccessfully, and cut across a hideous piece of building land to the back way of the station. Upon what had been a delightful orchard the jerry-builder had run up several long lines of ill-built only just not condemnable villas, apparently as distressing to live in as they were to look at. The sun blazed down upon them, and showed up their ill-painted railings and windows and narrow doors and gimcrack foreign workmanship.

The train steamed in as Archie was getting a ticket. He dashed up the steps three at a time, bought a paper, and jumped into a smoking-carriage.

Effie followed at his heels, and stood silently at the door of the carriage. Several pairs of eyes took stock of the straight-backed, short-skirted girl with the beautiful tanned face.

Archie leaned out of the carriage.

"Till seven o'clock to-morrow, then," he said. "What are you going to do to-day?"

Effie made a grimace. "Be beastly lonely," she replied.

Archie's heart suddenly began to beat quicker. "Why?" he asked. "I should have been working all the morning and all the evening."

"Yes, but I should have known that you were in the house," she replied simply.

The train slowly left the platform, and Effie turned away quickly.

She did not go home. She walked swiftly back through the village, leaving the quiet Queen Anne Vicarage standing primly among its trees and meadows on her left, and made her way to the river. She leaned

over the wooden rail of the bridge, and looked into the shallow, passing water. The golden shimmer of heat hung over it. The air was full of scents and the merry chattering of birds. Everywhere the world was green and glad.

She was lonely, strangely and suddenly lonely. But she was glad to be lonely. In her heart the seed of love had burst into blossom. She knew it. It had come with a shock. But she wanted to share her secret only with the buds and the trees and the sky.

CHAPTER XX

WHEN Archie Graham jumped out on to the platform at Paddington and bundled, with his suit-case, into a hansom, a feeling of great exhilaration sent the blood tingling through his veins. What a different Archie Graham it was from the one who had stood on that station six weeks before waiting for the East Brenton train!

"By Jove!" he said to himself, "I'll buy the most corking good pipe in London for dear old Harry Pemberton."

And then, a slight sense of humour showing him how sudden was his descent from the sublime to the ridiculous, he burst into a gay laugh.

And as he bowled through the streets of newly-painted houses, many of them temporarily enlivened by smart window-boxes, all too many of them sitting in dingy sleep behind To Let boards, moved in and out between glib taxi-cabs, softly rolling electric broughams, pompous carriages and pairs, bone-shaking, nerve-destroying motor 'buses, and the one or two lugubrious two-horse 'buses that clung to the road with pathetic tenacity, life was good.

The exhilaration that possessed the boy had taken possession of London. The sun was shining. The

King was in town. A levee was to be held at the palace. The opera season was in full swing, and the town was full.

The prim flower-beds in the park were alight with a mixture of well-blended colours. Its trees were almost as green as their country cousins at East Brenton and quite as happy, for luckily they knew no better. The tan was alive with riders. Nurse girls, all white, pushed perambulators with green shades, or were pulled along the parks by merry children, all grey and blue and white. Groups of Grenadiers in white tunics broke the green perspective with white wagging flags. Red-and-white awnings and small canvas tents of green-and-white hung over the windows and covered in the balconies of the many-tinted houses in Park Lane. Everywhere there was colour. Green, blue, and red on the advertisements on the 'buses, in the women's hats and sunshades, on the hoardings in Piccadilly, in the shop windows, on the flags that flew from hotels and buildings. The town, in its own way, paid tribute to the summer.

Harry drove to his father's house.

The man who opened the door gave a gasp of involuntary surprise.

"Mr. Archibald!"

"Thinks I've been sent down from East Brenton," thought Archie. "Not surprised."

The man recovered himself. "Good-morning, sir!" said he.

"I'm not coming in," said Archie. "Take that case up to my room, please, and have everything ready by seven o'clock. I shall dress here. Then put my clothes into the bag, and send it to the parcels"

office at Paddington, addressed to me to be called for. How's my father?"

"His lordship's in excellent health, sir, thank you."

"Good. Is he—er—in?"

"No, sir. His lordship went into Somersetshire on Saturday, and will not be back till to-morrow."

"I see," said the boy. "Right."

With a feeling of relief he got back into the cab. "Turnbull's, in Duke Street, St. James's," he said.

As the cab turned creakily round, he shot a quick glance at the silent house and shuddered.

He dismissed the cab at the tie-shop, went in, and immediately plunged into the immensely important duty of the day. He gradually weeded out a dozen ties and as many pairs of socks. Some of the socks were somewhat passionate—pale colours in silk, which, on an effeminate man, would have been quite sufficient to have made it necessary for him to send in his resignation to his club secretary, provided that the club valued its reputation. Archie was, however, one of the few men who could wear strange and wonderful things well, almost unnoticeably. The ties had nothing *outré* about them. They were old-fashioned, mid-Victorian, straight ties for making into bows, mostly with rather large round spots on black, blue, and heliotrope backgrounds. They were put down to his account. He changed his tie and socks in the back shop, and had the others sent to Grosvenor Square.

By this time it was nearly eleven o'clock. Feeling at peace with the world and perfectly satisfied with himself, Archie went forth and made his way easily into Jermyn Street, into St. James's Street, across Piccadilly, and into Bond Street. This narrow but

attractive street was already full of people, either shopping or wishing that they could shop. Archie went into Morris's and bought two serviceable pipes, one for the parson, the other naturally for himself. He then killed an hour by gazing into the picture-shops, examining the photographs of the well-known actors and actresses, most of whom he considered extremely bad at their game, having seen them once or twice, and watching the passers-by. Being of an observant disposition, and having been twice to Paris in the Vacs with a tutor, he was very greatly amused to see how un-French English women looked in clothes and hats of the last but one French fashion. The immense, curiously-shaped hats with long, hanging feathers that he had seen on the heads of dubious smart women in Paris had just found their way into London. The effect they created on the heads of obviously modest, English upper-middle-class women struck him as being incongruous to a degree, especially as they were worn with a look of self-conscious complacency mixed with an air of slight daring. He noticed, too, that several women, desiring above all things to attract attention, walked about in ruffs. These things were very hideous, and gave the wearer a sort of dog Toby appearance. They also looked uncomfortably stuffy.

Having done Bond Street—up one side and down the other—feeling by this time a tremendous man of the world, and having still an hour to kill before his appointment at the Cavalry Club, Archie walked down Piccadilly towards the Circus, suddenly remembering that he wanted his hair cut. During the miserable time that he had spent prowling about London, in solitary anger and dejection after he had been sent

down from Oxford, he had discovered with surprise a barber's which had been known to all civilised men for fifty years. It was tucked away in a queer little house, with many rooms and many narrow staircases, in the Arcade which runs from Charles Street, Haymarket, to Pall Mall behind His Majesty's Theatre and the "Carlton Hotel." How and why it had not been demolished with the other old landmarks of London, to make room for the beautiful but somewhat bastard white buildings that have risen, with astounding rapidity in all directions, he was unable to say. His love for old things was strong, and he took great pleasure in the narrow, dingy, and apparently unhealthy tunnel that was lined with old-established shops. And as he turned into its coolness from the glaring streets he unconsciously fell into a more graceful walk as though he were dressed in a three-cornered hat, a flowered satin coat, pale blue silk stockings, and high-heeled, buckled shoes.

One or two elderly gentlemen were under treatment, but he was welcomed by a fiery-haired attendant, with whom he had frequently discussed horse-racing, and was at once swathed in a wrapper and given the current number of *Punch*. *Punch*, hair-dressing, and dentistry always go together, and only those who have hair and teeth that need attention are aware that *Punch* is still brought out. It is almost worth while to have tooth-ache to make the discovery. Like the British Museum, the Zoological Gardens, and Cleopatra's Needle, *Punch* is an Institution.

Everything that it was possible for him to have done to his hair, except dyeing, he had done. Whereupon, suddenly finding that the hands of the clock were

suspiciously near one, he metaphorically threw off his Charles Surface clothes and manner, dashed out into the sun and a hansom, and drove to the Cavalry Club.

He had not seen Winstanley for four years. He was greeted warmly but monosyllabically by a man he failed to recognise. In manner as well as in appearance his former friend had undergone a great change. From being a jovial cherubic-faced boy, he had developed into the typical young Cavalry officer who had been stationed in a hot climate. His bullet head was close cropped. His skin resembled leather in colour and texture. The whites of his eyes were yellow, and his upper lip was covered with a thick array of short, stiff hairs. He wore a thin, dark flannel suit that was much too tight for him, and which looked as though it had been lying for some years, carefully folded, at the bottom of a trunk. He spoke in a quiet monotonous voice with something of an effort, studiously repressing anything in the nature of enthusiasm about everything. He never laughed, but he frequently wrinkled up his eyes.

Archie felt a little damped. He felt that he would be obliged to make his friend's acquaintance all over again. He was unable to make up his mind for some moments whether Winstanley's manner was Service side. Later on he found, to his relief, that it was quite unaffected and unconscious, and was merely the outcome of his training, his environment, and the red book. He rather wished that he had left his manner behind him with his uniform.

Winstanley led Archie into the hat room.

"Wash?" he asked.

"No thanks," said Archie.

"Lunch at once?"

"Oh yes, I think so."

"Right."

They went into the dining-room, and chose a table by the window.

"Lots of stuff," said Winstanley, handing over the menu.

"Cold salmon and cucumber, I think," said Archie.

"Sound." He made it so, for two. "Whisky-and-soda?"

"How about cider cup?"

"Corkin'." He issued the order sharply. Then he looked Archie over quietly, without disguising the examination. "Know you anywhere," he said, touching his tie.

Archie laughed a little uncomfortably. He felt himself catching the Marconi method of conversation.

"Yes?"

"Not altered a day. Put in a good time?"

"More or less."

"Doin' anything?"

"Cramming."

"Why?"

"Must do something, I suppose."

"Not unless you're obliged. Best life goin'—doin' nothin'."

"Yes, but I've got to work."

"Pity. What's your job?"

"Bar."

"K.C. game?"

"That's the idea."

"Oh! good fun."

"When you get there."

"Oxford, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"All right?"

"Um, well. . . ."

"I see. Overrated. Like the Service."

"Don't you like it?"

"Poor show. Dyin' out fast. Old man goin' strong?"

"Oh yes, very."

"Good. Goin' down to look up my old people termorrer."

The waiter brought the food. A boy brought the drinks. Winstanley rattled his glass. It tinkled faintly.

"Here," he called brusquely, "more ice."

During luncheon the conversation flagged many times, but both boys were perfectly happy, perfectly satisfied, and perfectly cordial. Winstanley answered Archie's questions about India and his life there in *précis* form, giving no descriptions and avoiding any lapse into picturesque phrasing. Archie's vivid imagination filled in the spaces. Winstanley never permitted himself to show any curiosity about Archie's doings. He conveyed the impression that it was bad form to want to know anything.

By the time these two boys rose from luncheon and went upstairs into the smoking-room for a cigar and coffee, Archie, with his extraordinary and quite unconscious faculty of taking the colour of the people with whom he happened to be for any length of time, was no longer vivid, enthusiastic, and energetic as he had become under Harry's moulding hands, but was, for the time being, the typical sober young Cavalry officer, stiff, brusque, and self-repressed.

They smoked their cigars sitting at an open window looking over Piccadilly and the Park. The incessant traffic below was so noisy that it was necessary to talk loudly to be heard. To Winstanley, who had been in quiet stations on the plains of India, the rumble was delightful. The movement and the rush fascinated him and made his blood dance, though he would not have owned to it for a step. It had something of the same effect upon Archie Graham, whose six weeks in the queer little primitive corner of the world in the valley of the Thames developed into six months when looked back at from the window of the club.

Cigar at an end, Winstanley rose.

"Get on, what?"

"I'm with you," said Archie.

"Ask the porter to blow up a taxi-cab at once," said Winstanley to a waiter. He turned to his friend.

"A wash?"

"Good idea."

So down went the two boys again, side by side, in step, erect, ingenuous and mirth-providing to every one except themselves. A taxi slipped swiftly up as they made their way into the hall. They strolled across to it, and were carried into the stream of traffic which was going towards Hyde Park Corner, there to break off to the left or to go down the hill into Kensington.

CHAPTER XXI

WINSTANLEY had changed in his rooms in Bury Street, Archie in Grosvenor Square—the Gov'nor's he called it, not home. He never had called that big, silent house home. And at half-past seven they met in the foyer of the "Carlton Hotel" for dinner.

Archie, something to his chagrin, was not the host. It turned out that Winstanley had promised to dine with a Mrs. Wilberton and her daughter. He had telephoned to ask if he might bring Archie. The Wilbertons, upon being told that Archie would take a box at the Gaiety, were delighted.

Mrs. Wilberton was the wife of a colonel of a line regiment stationed in Bombay, who was determined that Milly should marry Winstanley. The advent of another member would make the party quite charming. The mother could monopolise the Graham boy, and so leave Milly uninterruptedly to Winstanley.

The ladies arrived only a matter of ten minutes late. Mrs. Wilberton was a pretty, slight, bubbly woman who was considerably on the wrong side of forty, but who, by extremely careful dressing, constant massage, and most artistic make-up passed in everything but sunlight for thirty-two with easy triumph. The daughter was extremely tall and pale, with small

patrician features, large blue eyes, and much hair, which was so fair that it looked almost silver in the strong electric light. Her manner was languid and insolent, and her voice clear, full, and affected.

It was generally believed by the regiment that Porkey Wilberton had married a girl from a hat-shop. The men mostly dismissed the statement as libel, because they found the little woman extremely pleasant and sympathetic, with a rather witty tongue. The wives implicitly accepted the statement as true, because she was the best-dressed woman in the regiment with the least money to do it on. The one or two members of the officers' mess who were quite indifferent, but who were of a far too keenly psychological turn, knew that the statement was true because the little woman and her daughter always made stringent and searching inquiries as to the antecedents of the people whom they were asked to meet, and used the words lady and gentleman just a little too frequently.

Archie noticed immediately, with compassion, that poor old Win was very badly "gone on" the girl.

It was too early for the room to be full when they drew in to their little table. There were just enough tables occupied to give the beautiful room an air of cheeriness, and just enough empty to make the advent of each new set of arrivals interesting.

The band was playing a hackneyed German waltz from the most successful musical play of the day. It seemed to Archie's exacting ear to be nothing more than a *réchauffé* of an early Victorian air very beautifully harmonized.

To poor old Winstanley it seemed to be filled with the highest kind of sentiment. Its smooth rhythm,

drawn out with much tremolo by the first violin with all the rich undercurrent of the other instruments, combined with the delicate aroma of scent which surrounded the fair, stately girl, almost made him giddy. He became more monosyllabic than ever, until the champagne warmed him up. Then, although absolutely his own master, he began to indulge in longer words and shorter pauses. He was a typical soldier.

Archie, monopolised by the glib little hostess, very quickly dropped his newly-acquired cavalry manner, and caught Mrs. Wilberton's. He chattered freely, laughed frequently, and kept up an incessant flow of easy boyish cynicisms that gave the Anglo-Indian much amusement.

"Graham," she said, in one of his pauses—"Graham. Let me see now. Something tells me, whether it is the cut of your eyebrows, or the way your hair grows on your temples, I can't say, that you must be one of the dear Grahams of Lochaltie. Douglas Graham—sweet old Duggie—lay with us at Malta before the S.A. show. What a *dear* he was! Poor, of course, as a church mouse, but just as slick and beady. He got out of Ladysmith—there, if you like, was a foolish affair, so badly managed!—and left the Service to marry any sort of person, with, so I hear, a pretty face, and nothing else, not even a motto, and settled down among the far blue hills of Lochaltie. He must be your—first cousin, I suppose? No?"

"No," said Archie. "We cut that lot, with everything except claymores, in the dark ages."

"What lot are you, then? I just knew another Graham—I forget his Christian name—who is on the staff of the C—— in C—— now at this moment—a tall,

light, sidey boy, with black hair and red eyebrows, who was quite *épris* of a Mrs. Talbot, all of whose past lies in front of her. He is the eldest son, I believe, of the Earl of Aberlady, that stern old marble person who runs the Cabinet."

"My father," said Archie.

"Oh, good Heavens!" she cried. "I've put my foot into it—both feet into it, right beyond the knee! One foot for the brother, and the other for the father. What *am* I to say?" She looked at the boy with greater interest and instant calculation.

"Nothing more," said Archie.

"Ha! ha! ha! ha! Splendid!" she cried. "How deliciously Chesterfieldian. You reproach and forgive in the same breath. Dear me, how small the world is! Milly, dear, what *do* you think? Mr. Graham is a brother of Captain Graham, who so expertly arranged your train when you were presented to the Viceroy."

Miss Wilberton raised her almost imperceptible eyebrows, and gave Archie a wide-eyed stare.

"Really!" she said, with well-simulated disinterest. "How odd!"

"I thought I ought to know you," continued Mrs. Wilberton. "I've been digging away in the recesses of my mind, quite like one of those weird people who indulge in gardening and keep parrots. The moment I saw you with Win, I said to myself, without a moment's reflection, 'I know that good-looking boy.' I really did say good-looking, and honestly I said boy. Both are true, and none the less unnecessary for that, I suppose. How delightful! You have the true Aberlady eyebrows, and the way your hair grows at the temples is Aberladian to a T. Why do you smile?"

Archie coloured up. He had been on the point of saying that three minutes before she had identified his eyebrows and hair as being of the Lochaltic brand.

Luckily Miss Wilberton, who was insufferably bored by Winstanley, saved the situation.

"If we are to see anything of the first act——"

"Good gracious, how time flies! Quite beyond all decent regulation speed. Win, catch the man's eye, will you? Here's my purse. Pay him, like a dear, while we rush into our things."

She rose, threw Archie a brilliant smile, and darted away between the tables, followed equally swiftly, but with far less obvious effort, by her daughter.

The waiter disappeared for the bill. Winstanley lit a cigarette, and handed his case to Archie. "Eh?" he asked, in an undertone.

Archie understood that he was asking him if he did not think that Milly was the most beautiful girl in all the world.

He nodded.

"Ah!" said Winstanley—"ah!" He wagged his head several times, and fingered the purse reverently. It was her mother's.

"Poor old Win!" thought Archie. "What a girl!"

And in his mind's eye he saw Effie addressing a ball, with the breeze playing with her hair and the sun glowing on her cheeks and the sky reflected in her eyes.

"East Brenton again to-morrow, thank God!" he said to himself.

CHAPTER XXII

MRS. WILBERTON enjoyed the play. The music was delicious, but the *libretto*, as it is still called, seemed to her to be vulgar and inane, and the actors and actresses careless and inefficient. She was, however, being seen in public with a son of the most distinguished member of the Cabinet, who was also a Peer. No one knew the poor little soul, but she did not enter into that question. Even if there was only one person in the audience who did know her and whom she would eventually be able to tell that "the charming boy with the black hair and *such* a sensitive face was the Hon. Archibald Graham, son of Lord Aberlady, you know," she would be perfectly happy. She had the typical English middle-class snobbishness, which was not only perfectly harmless, but had its uses.

Milly Wilberton got her pleasure by being seen to turn her back on the stage by the many mildly curious people who turned their glasses on the box. It amused her less to see the play than to create an impression.

Winstanley was so happy that he was in the depths of delicious misery. For the first time in his life he wished that he was one of "those booky coves" who had the knack of quoting poetry. He sat with a rigid

back and his large white-gloved hands on his knees, and with a totally expressionless face.

Archie Graham watched and enjoyed everything—the piece, the music, the topical allusions, the self-satisfied, leading players, the chorus girls, who made a point of not doing all that they had been taught to do, and the little comedy in the box. His quick ear caught some of the prettier airs. He would try to remember them to play to Effie.

“Effie! Thank Heaven for East Brenton to-morrow!”

After the play Mrs. Wilberton begged Archie to take her home, as she was so frightened in the London traffic. Winstanley, by a combination of brute force and tact, managed to bring up a four-wheeler almost at once. He had been looking forward all the evening to the joy of taking the ladies home. Not caring an atom for this boy’s feelings, Mrs. Wilberton bade him a gushing Good-night.

“We have tea with you at Rumpelmeyer’s to-morrow, don’t we? Charming. Four-fifteen to the minute. So glad. Go straight home, dear Win, won’t you? Cram in, dear Mr. Graham. It’s all on your way to Paddington. You’ve *never* left your glasses behind, Milly, surely? No? Oh! that’s right. Tell the man 29, De Vere Gardens, Win, will you, please? Thank you. *À demain.*”

She kissed her little hand to the pained and disappointed boy, whose tanned face looked almost black beneath his antiquated opera hat, and was lost in the conglomeration of traffic.

This sudden manœuvre put Archie out somewhat. For one thing he had had more than enough of the

Wilbertons. For another it might seem to old Win that he was cutting into his game. And for yet another, he was very anxious not to miss the last train down to East Brenton. He had told the parson that he would not sleep in London. He had left his watch in his day-clothes.

The play had lingered on until quarter-past eleven. The train went at five minutes past twelve. He had no notion how far away De Vere Gardens was. It would not have to be far at the jog-trot pace that seemed to be the best the four-wheeler could do. However, Mrs. Wilberton was frightened, and he could not possibly get out of it. He comforted himself by reflecting that De Vere Gardens was on the way.

He played up to Mrs. Wilberton's almost endless stream of underlined words and dull bright chatter as well as gradually jumping nerves would permit, and surreptitiously spent his time darting anxious glances to the right and left to see if he could find a clock.

The cab was hung up for a moment in the avalanche of converging traffic at Piccadilly Circus. It seemed ages before it reached Hyde Park Corner. On and on, jingling and rattling, went the abortive and abominable conveyance up to Knightsbridge, and still on. Chatter, chatter, chatter went the little bird-like woman; more and more jumpy grew Archie. The fair affected girl pretended to be asleep. She saw the wisdom of making Archie her second string. She well knew that utter indifference was most effective with certain men.

They arrived at 29, De Vere Gardens as a clock struck twelve.

"Good Lord!" cried the boy.

There was a note of such distress in his voice that

168 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Mrs. Wilberton turned round quickly as she was mounting the steps.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Lost something?"

"Yes, my train."

He handed out the languid Milly.

"I'm so glad," said Mrs. Wilberton. "Don't think me unsympathetic, but now you *must* come in and have something."

"No, thanks!" said Archie, barely able to conceal his anger and annoyance.

"Oh! but you must."

"No, really, thanks!"

"But I won't take no. You've missed your train, so what does it matter? You won't get into trouble, will you? But, of course, that's an absurd question. You're old enough to be your own master. What can it matter if you go back or not?"

"I awfully wanted to keep my word," said the boy simply.

"Keep it some other time. Just one night-cap." She nudged her daughter with her elbow.

"Oh, do!" said Milly.

The lights of a prowling hansom could be seen at the bottom of the street. Archie whistled.

"Too sorry," he said. "But I have an appointment to-morrow morning at seven o'clock. I shall be obliged to leave London by a workman's train. Good-night, and thanks very much for the evening."

He bowed, turned on his heel, and ran. The cab had drawn up. Archie jumped into it.

"Grosvenor Square," he shouted, "and be quick."

CHAPTER XXIII

JUST precisely at the time that Mrs. and Miss Wilberton entered the dining-room at the "Carlton Hotel" with the two boys, Harry Pemberton sat down on the top step of the old Vicarage at his wife's feet, with an arm round Effie, to enjoy a quiet pipe after dinner, and a talk before going with them, as usual, to the club.

A superb sunset was taking place behind the poplars, away in front of them. In a transparent sky, flecked with thin feathery streaks of orange, the great golden sun was slowly falling. There was no wind. The trees threw long shadows across the thickly buttercup-sprinkled meadows. High up against the sky a company of martins were wheeling about. Under the pollards, a stone's throw from the old iron gate, masses of flies were moving. A silver mist was beginning to rise, like smoke, from the duck pond. All the birds within earshot had much to say, softly. A robin with dim breast jumped from the old wall to the little lawn inside it and back again, giving sharp, merry whistles.

On the village green to the right, hidden from them by the thickly-leaved, motionless branches of several

170 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

elms, Harry heard the shrill voices of some boys, still playing.

Bill, licking his lips after an excellent dinner, came and sat between Harry's feet.

"Hot day to-morrow," he said.

No one spoke. Helen's little hand crept out and lay on Harry's broad shoulder. There was a long silence.

Then they all spoke at once.

"Archie——" said Harry.

"Archie——" said Helen.

"Archie——" said Effie.

And they all laughed.

"Extraordinary how that boy has become part of this house," said Harry."

"A dear boy, poor boy!" said Helen. "I hope he has had a very nice day."

"Polo's a great game," said Harry.

"He was to lunch with his friend, and then his friend was to dine with him. Wasn't that the arrangement?" said Helen.

"That was it. Two men, dipping back into the past. Two old men in a young world! I did it, in the brave days when I was twenty-one."

The gate at the end of the drive opened with a click. Hurried steps sounded on the gravel. Bill cocked his ears.

Harry sat up straight.

A barge boy came through the small iron gate with a face the colour of brick-dust. He did not see the group on the steps, and was hurrying round to the kitchen door.

"Hullo, young Garge!" said Harry.

The boy pulled up short, and touched his cap.

"Letter from muvver," he said.

Harry rose, went down the steps, and opened the letter. It was a dirty half-sheet of paper, on which there were a few lines in large illiterate writing.

"Oh!" cried Harry.

"What is it, dear?" asked Helen anxiously.

"You know that pretty little girl, Mrs. Lemmins's daughter—Lemmins of the *Albert Edward* barge—has been missing for months?"

"Yes. Oh! has she come back?"

"Yes. In great trouble. She is asking for me. Run back to the barge, Gargy boy, and say that I will bicycle down at once." The boy started off without a word. "Effie, darling, go up to my dressing-room, and bring down the brandy flask."

Effie went swiftly.

Helen was on her feet. Bill had already risen, and was watching Harry intently. The group had dissolved as all groups dissolved in that house at a call from any of Harry's people.

"Thank God she is found!" said Helen. "Such a sweet girl and so pretty, and as good as gold. Poor Mrs. Lemmins. It has nearly killed her."

Harry was fastening clips into his trousers. "In great trouble, the mother writes." He mounted the steps, bent down, and kissed his wife. "Don't say a word at the club. I don't know how long I shall be. Don't wait up for me. I'll let myself in."

Effie put the flask into his pocket, and ran round to the barn to get the old, hard-worn bicycle.

"In great trouble," Harry repeated. "I hope—I do hope——"

He stood silently looking at the now red sky from which

the sun had gone. There was an expression on his face of intense anxiety.

"Such a dear little girl," he said. "I christened her nineteen years ago. She was born on the same night as Effie."

Effie held the bicycle ready. Harry gave her a kiss, and, wheeling the machine to the gate, opened it, mounted, and rode away quickly.

The evening was close and stuffy. All the cottage doors round the green were open. Elderly men and women sat by them, the men in shirt sleeves, smoking, the women in aprons.

The green itself was dotted with young children, some hatless, many shoeless, all lying about. The milkman's old white horse was grazing quietly, with flicking tail. Groups of slouching men stood in the road and leaned against a wall, spitting. Hats were touched as Harry rode by towards the station. He free-wheeled through the railway bridge, and pedalled hard up to the canal bridge, over which he had helped the brewer's dray. At the foot of it he turned off into a narrow lane full of deep wheel ruts, old boots, and empty tins. It led down to the tow-path of the canal.

Two empty barges lay alongside the bank. Behind and in front of them gleamed the still water, cut with reflections of telegraph poles, a large wharf and its sheds, the bridge to the right, and a row of one-story wooden huts, with tile roofs and patches of flowers growing in small gardens. The almost incessant noise of passing trains mingled with the cawing of distant crows. Higher up the bank some boys were throwing stones at a bottle in the canal. The stones made a curious plopping sound as they broke the water. The

whole scene was sordid and shabby, but the magnificent panorama of sky gave it a touch of poetry which is never absent from places where there is water.

A woman, squat and broad of beam, wearing a large black sunbonnet, under which there gleamed a fat, capable, sun-burnt face with a big double chin, was standing on the path, waiting.

When she saw Harry Pemberton she came forward a few steps and swallowed back her emotion.

Harry stood his bicycle against a large pile of stones and held out his hand.

Mrs. Lemmins wiped her own on her short skirt and took it.

"Mary Anne's a-come 'ome, sir," she said.

"I'm glad," said Harry. "Well?"

"She won't say 'oo took 'er awiy, nor yit wheer she's bin. 'E deserted 'er sometime ago, and I reckon she's bin sellin' flars in London. 'Ow she—she come to find the *Albert Edward* ah dunno. Reckon she's a bin on ther tramp down the canal. The trouble's on 'er nar."

"Oh—that?" said Harry.

"Yuss, that, sir, and 'er not married. Doctor's bin, and is a-comin' ag'in at eleven o'clock. She's on the *Albert Edward*. Willie Taylor's lent me the *Belle o' Readin'* fer ther night. But there won't be no sleep fer me." She began to cry.

"That won't hurt you, Mrs. Lemmins. You've had sleep every night of your life. Shall I go down to Mary Anne?"

"If you would beserkind, sir."

Harry's cheerful practicality had an instant effect. Mrs. Lemmins stopped crying, realising that there were

more useful things to do in the family crisis than to waste time in self-indulgence.

Harry went on board the *Albert Edward*. The wood-work in the stern was everywhere painted brilliantly but hideously. The long tiller was like a barber's pole, an elongated sugar-stick. The cabin and the wood-work round and above it were covered with a curiously-arranged design of clashing primitive colours.

The cabin itself, which was very little more than a large box, lighted and ventilated only from the top, was spotlessly clean and neat and picturesque. All the brass-work was burnished until it looked hot. Plates glistened in the rack, and blue-and-white cups hung from hooks with all their mouths the same way. The cooking-stove and the tin chimney that went from it through the top of the cabin shone. Some sort of cotton material, stamped with extremely red rose-buds with very bright green leaves, hung over the cupboards on thin, brass rails. The lamp that was suspended from a ring in the cabin's roof was brass with a red paper shade. The little flap table that became an extra bunk when necessary was covered with a cloth striped with broad lines of red and white. Wherever it was possible, coloured drawings of racehorses and public favourites were neatly tacked to the walls. The small square of carpet upon the floor of the cabin was even more highly coloured than everything else put together. It had its yellows, greens, and reds, blues, oranges, and pinks. The entire Lemmings circle considered it to be a very beautiful thing.

Harry bent double and descended. The first object to catch his eyes was the face of a young girl, with a mass of golden hair, propped up against pillows.

The face was thin and wasted, but delicately oval. The nose was small and straight, the chin small and round, the ears almost laughably small. But the eyes were large and very blue, with long golden lashes. It would have been the face of a picture-book angel, but for the lines of suffering round the pink lips, black hollows under the eyes, and in the eyes themselves a look of blazing defiance.

The girl was lying in Mrs. Lemmins's bunk. The evening was hot, and there was little air anywhere. In the cabin there seemed never to have been any air. She had flung a thick blue eiderdown away, and had thrust her arms from beneath the clothes. Her forehead glistened with beads of perspiration.

As Harry went down, she caught her breath and gripped her hands together and her nostrils trembled. But she tilted her chin and set her teeth.

"My little Mary Anne," said Harry. He bent over and touched her cheek.

A rush of tears came into the girl's eyes. She caught up the parson's hand, and pressed it to her lips.

"Oh!" she whispered, "I wanted you—ah! I wanted you, not 'arf I didn't, sir. If it 'adn't bin becos I knewed as 'ow you come when they telled yer, I should 'a laid darn in the canal."

"Dear little Mary Anne!" said Harry.

A sort of smile twisted her lips. "Ever bin told as you was like deep, quiet water, sir? . . . There! Like me to show thankfulness by bein' saucy, I don't think. Thank you kindly fer comin'."

"I would have covered a hundred miles to see you, my child."

"Would you truly, sir? . . . Not if you'd known

'ow you would find me? . . . Mother didn't say in 'er note wot I'd done, did she?"

Harry sat down. All the man in him was shaken at the sight of the little girl, whose purity of mind had been proverbial, reduced to this condition outside wedlock. He was filled with a fierce desire to punish the man who had brought about the ruin of such a spotless innocence.

"She said that you were in trouble, Mary Anne," he replied.

"Yuss, that there's ther wiy it's always put. . . . It wouldn't be called trouble if I was merried, though, would it?" There was a shrill hysterical note of scorn in her voice for a moment. Then her tone became puzzled and argumentative. "Ah don't see as 'ow trouble's the word neither, unless it's for the little 'un. 'E don't 'ave no trouble. I suppose I shall git over it. It's the little 'un as will 'ave all the trouble."

"We'll see to that, Mary Anne," said Harry. "Don't worry."

"Will we, sir? I want the baby, somethin' awful. I believe I've wanted this baby since ther diy muvver give me a doll. . . . I was ter blime for this, 'e said."

"You!—you!" cried Harry. "What a brute and a coward! You knew nothing."

The girl's hands opened and closed and then lay palms upwards. It was very hot, and there was no air.

"That's it, sir."

"What's it?"

"Me knowin' nothing!"

"I don't know what you mean."

"'E explained it all right ter me. Me knowin' nothin', 'e sez, and what it all meant, brought it abart. If I'd a-bin told when I was old enuf to understand, I should 'a sent 'im awiy, he sez, double quick, and saved 'im and me and the little 'un from this 'ere. The man ain't built for thinkin', 'e sez. 'E knows, but 'e ain't perfect, and won't let 'isself think. 'E sez as 'ow if *we* was taught ter think and knew as much as ther man, there'd be very little of this trouble fer us. It's the muvver first, 'e sez, and then us, that's ter blime, never the men."

Harry was startled. He had listened to the girl intently. He followed the inflections of her voice and the nasal pronunciation of her words with his head bent forward eagerly. He glared at her with contracted eyebrows when she stopped.

"Oh, my God, yes!" he said. "What that low brute said is right. It's the mothers and the fathers who are to blame. If you had not been ignorant, this wouldn't have happened, for you're a good girl. It's your mother who is to blame."

Mary Anne put out two eager hands. "Oh," she begged, "don't go for to give it to muvver! She don't know as 'ow she's anyway to blime. She was allays very good ter me."

Harry was deeply moved. He was like a man who stumbles on something suddenly for which he has been searching for years.

"The mother who is to blame. The parents, the teachers, the parsons, the doctors, who are to blame, but the mother first. He's right. That brute's right. We don't tell our children the truth. We hide behind a most criminal false modesty—a personal cowardice,

178 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

a fear of looking the great simple things of life square in the face. The best way to preserve innocence is to demolish ignorance."

Mary Anne eyed the parson in astonishment. It seemed to her incredible that Mr. Pemberton, the Vicar, could take sides with the man she had loved and gone away with—the man who had thrown all the blame on to her when the inevitable result was certain, and who had wrung from her soul an outburst of passionate anger and resentment for what she had taken to be his selfishness and cowardice.

"You—side—wiv—'im, sir?" she asked, in a voice shrill with amazement.

"No," said Harry; "I side with you, my poor child—with you against your mother, against myself, against my wife, against all mothers and fathers and so-called teachers, and all who are answerable to God for the disaster that has happened to you."

Mary Anne began to whimper. The feeling that shook his voice frightened her, while the fact that the Vicar did not hold her up as a bad girl gladdened her heart and almost wiped out the recollection of anguish and despair, hidings and long tramps, hunger and dreadful thoughts.

"Oh, my dear little girl, I'm sorry!" said Harry—"frightfully sorry!"

The girl caught up his hand and kissed it and soaked it in her tears.

She didn't understand what made him sorry, whether it was because he thought that his vehemence when she was feeling so ill might upset her, or what. She only knew that he was not looking at her, as she expected, with disgust, but was sympathetic and very kind. Her

gratitude brought the first good tears to her eyes that she had known for months.

As for Harry he was sorry because he held himself greatly responsible for the trouble that had come upon this poor child. As a parson he ought to have swept aside all the ghastly conventions that have been built up round the primitive facts of sex, and insisted on his people dealing out the truth to their children.

"What if this girl had been Effie?" he asked himself. "Effie, who is just as ignorant as she was, and who may have just as strong a maternal instinct without knowing why, and where it leads."

This thought haunted him through the evening, the night, and the following morning.

He sat, until the doctor came, in the cabin of the *Albert Edward*. He thrust out of his mind all the elements of this case as they affected him and his wife and daughter, and devoted himself wholly to Mary Anne. He blunted the edge of her fright by telling her all the amusing things that had happened in and round East Brenton since she had been away. He told her how the Parish Council had put iron hurdles all across the green on the path worn by the field-girls, and how they were not to be found the next morning. How the Parish Council—"well-meaning idiots"—had painted the hurdles white when they were discovered in ditches and put them back, and how, although the green was watched by a cobbler who read detective stories when he should have been mending the village boots, the hurdles were no sooner put up than they were pulled down again. The field-girls, strong, sturdy, merry-faced, impudent, loud-laughing, had made a short cut over the green, and were going to continue to

use it for all the hurdles and Parish Councils the world contained. The little affair had been watched by the whole village with infinite amusement, and the Parish Council was beaten—the path remained.

He told the girl the well-known village story of the Italian ice-cream man from Rexbridge who had fallen in love with old Mrs. Pounding's youngest daughter who worked at the mill, and how, to the intense delight of the village, he had married them, although the only English the Italian knew was "Finer day, yes," and "One penny, please." Mrs. Pounding talked of her daughter as Mrs. Gambleter Leankervalley, the man's name being Gambetta Leoncavalli.

He also gave her a graphic description of the evening at the club when Archie Graham sat down at the piano and rattled off comic songs, of the great billiard match, and of the new room that was in course of construction.

Finally, he made the world seem almost sunny to her again by promising that she should live in the Vicarage and help cook as soon as she should be strong enough.

Then the doctor came, with the village nurse, and he withdrew to the cabin of the *Belle o' Reading* to keep Mrs. Lemmins company.

"Don't you wait, sir," she had said.

"She has asked me to wait," Harry had replied.

But he was restless and anxious. He was unable to sit still in old Willie Taylor's stuffy little cabin, and Mrs. Lemmins, with her continual whispered wailing of the disgrace that Mary Anne had brought upon the *Albert Edward*, was more than he could stand. If he had not left the cabin to pace up and down the tow-path, he knew that he would have burst forth and told

the woman what that brute had said, and that he agreed with him. The moment was not then for reproaches. Nor did he feel himself to be the one to reproach. There was nothing to choose between Mrs. Lemmins and himself. Both had pursued the policy of the ostrich, although she was the one to be punished for it, so far.

The night was dark and humid. Intermittent lightning cut open the sky and made everything silver for the eighth part of a second. At first the intense silence was broken, and hideously broken, from time to time by shunting trains. Even this noise ceased at last, and then the only sounds to break the slow heavy hour before dawn were the piteous cries of the girl who had never been told.

When the baby was born it was dead.

CHAPTER XXIV

IT was five o'clock in the morning when Harry rode slowly home. He was tired, bodily and mentally. Nevertheless, he did not let himself into the house and go to bed. He put his machine away in the barn, and then, with his arms behind his back, paced up and down the dew-soaked lawn, slowly and thoughtfully, for nearly two hours.

Every minute of this time he was thinking and arguing and making plans.

In all his years of parsonhood in London and East Brenton, the case of Mary Anne Lemmins was the first one in which ignorance had been the cause of the fall. It was the first case with which he had had to do, that made him see how frightful was the danger of ignorance. So far as he was aware, all the poor, wretched girls whose cases he had known had got into trouble not because they wanted to be immoral, but because if they were not immoral they were given no opportunities for enjoyment. It was a sordid, calculating, knowledgeable affair, winked at by the parents, most of whom were surprised if their girls were married before this "trouble," as they called it—not callously, but in an every-day dull tone—came to them. Among

the poor families to whom he had devoted himself the sex problem was no problem. The mothers and daughters recognised facts. Men must be men, they said; if their girls did not want to be left at home and remain hopelessly neglected they must not be squeamish. Like everybody who knows anything of the lives of the great struggling class, he was appalled at the looseness of their ways, and he set himself to raise the moral standard of the young men, because he knew that this was the best way to protect the young women.

But Mrs. Lemmins was a respectable, self-respecting woman, who earned fair wages, and who lived a healthy if hard-working life. Mary Anne had been carefully brought up, and was intended for domestic service. She was not a slum child reared in the filthy corners of a city, nor a worker in the fields obliged to associate with blasphemous and drunken people, who regarded self-indulgence as their only pastime. Her innocence had been jealously guarded, and had shone out of her big blue eyes. "No lady's daughter," Mrs. Lemmins used to boast, "need be ashamed to speak to my Mary Anne." The girl had been held up as a model in the school and Sunday school.

"A model," cried Harry, in his heart, "of what a girl ought not to be! Innocent, yes, but ignorant, no! There is nothing degrading about the truth. What is degrading and wicked is the way we all have of never telling the truth to children about the primary necessities of human beings, of hiding behind a false puritanism, of ignoring all questions of sex, and of quibbling them away from the utterly mistaken standpoint of 'cleanmindedness.' We turn sniggering or shamefaced from youthful questions that are prompted

by an unconscious awakening of the maternal instinct ; drive our ignorant children to such tragedies as poor little Mary Anne will suffer under all her life. And we cry out to You, O my God, for pity, when we deserve nothing but punishment. . . .

“ If I can be a good parson, I said to Thorganby, I shall be perfectly satisfied. A good parson ! I’m neither a good parson nor a good father. I’m a self-satisfied creature, who is content to grope along the rotten and conventional ways, and who has never had the common sense to go to the root of a thing which wrecks more lives than drink and gambling and the lack of God. But I will learn my lesson. To the unfortunate girls who know and don’t care, I can only persist in giving inspiration and moral ambition. But to the even more unfortunate girls who know nothing, I will in future insist upon their being treated truthfully, honestly, courageously, and sincerely. I will fight false-modesty tooth and nail. I will attack the conventional insistence upon ignorance with all my strength. I will not permit helpless, shame-faced puritanism on the part of my wife or any mother of ignorant girls in this village to remain a menace in their homes, so help me God ! ”

Having come to a decision, Harry Pemberton took his final turn upon the lawn. He noticed with surprise that the day was alive, fresh in its vigour, full of a soft promise of heat and peace. He looked at his watch. It was nearly seven o’clock. All the birds were up and about. Bees were setting out on their day’s journey. Flowers had opened their dewy eyes to the sun. Away in the distance the sound of a machine cutting the hay drifted towards him, and a cackling

laugh rose from a string of girls hurrying to their work in the fields.

For a moment the parson stood and watched and listened. God had made the world incredibly beautiful, yet men and women did very little to keep it so. A great humbleness came upon the big, sunny, eager man who did his best. "I will do better, Master," he said. "Give me time to try."

He went round to the front of the sleeping house and came face to face with Archie Graham.

"You!" he cried.

His surprise at seeing the boy, carrying his suit-case, whom he had supposed to be in bed, may have sounded like anger.

Archie coloured up.

"I couldn't get down last night," he said. "Win-stanley had a touch of fever, and I had to stay up and see to him."

"Good for you, old boy," said Harry, taking his arm.

CHAPTER XXV

ARCHIE and Effie played their nine holes. Effie was in the highest spirits. She made no attempt to hide her delight at seeing the boy again. It danced in her eyes and lit up her face and gave elasticity to her step.

Bill's welcome was undemonstrative but extremely cordial.

"Saw you marching off with a bag yesterday," he remarked. "I hate bags. They always mean loneliness for me. You don't look perky though, Archie, my friend."

As a matter of fact, Archie was feeling anything but perky. He had had only three and a half hours' sleep after a very tiring and exciting day, and he had made a rush for the workman's train that had left Paddington at a quarter to six o'clock. But that was not the reason. He had lied to Harry Pemberton. He had been forced to discover that he had not, after all, got out of the ruts of his slipshodness, as he had yesterday believed he had. Providence had indeed stepped in to show him where he stood.

Effie set the pace.

"Do you notice all the changes since you've been away?" she asked gaily.

"Yes," he replied gloomily.

"No you don't," she laughed. "You passed the rose-trees at the back without looking at them. Three of them have got three new magnificent roses apiece."

"Really?"

Effie pulled up in the drive, and pointed to two old trunks of trees in whose hollows a mass of sweet-peas were blooming, eight feet up the sticks.

"Look at those darlings!" she cried. "Dozens of new blooms since you went away. And I picked armsful yesterday afternoon. But the more you pick, the more you may. Do you know what I think about sweet-peas?"

"No!" said the boy, trying to catch something of the girl's spirits. "What do you think about 'em?"

They fell in step and marched out of the gate and on to the green. Bill was looking at them impatiently from the road.

"Can't you two hurry for once?" he shouted. "Jaw, jaw, jaw!"

"Well, I've discovered," she said, "that a sweet-pea is different from all other flowers. It's not a bit cocky and puffed up about its bloom. Its only ambition in life is to bloom quickly, if possible somewhere where it can't be seen, and then hurry for all it's worth into pod. Since I've found that out I simply hate picking it. It does seem so cruel to stop it from doing what it wants to do so awfully much, don't you think so?"

"I lied to the parson," Archie was saying to himself. "I'm just as rotten as I was, although I've had my chance."

"I don't believe you're listening," said Effie.

"Oh, yes, I am. You love picking them because you think that's the only thing they care about."

Effie stood still, threw up her head, and gave a howl of laughter.

"You're wool gathering," she said.

"Wish I could gather something, even wool," he replied. His tone was so bitter, so unlike his usual alert, cheery tone, that the girl looked at him sharply.

"What do you mean? What's the matter?"

"Nothing—nothing at all . . . By the way, you don't seem to take the slightest interest in my yesterday's doings."

"Well!" said Effie, "shall I tell you the truth?"

"Yes," cried the boy, "for God's sake do—always!"

There was a pause. After, Effie eyed the boy.

"You *are* in a queer mood to-day, Archie."

The boy gave a sort of smile. "No, I'm not. I'm quite all right. Say what you were going to say. (I lied to the parson.)"

"What were we discussing?"

"My yesterday's doings."

"Oh, yes! Well, I don't take a vast interest in anything that you did yesterday, if you must know."

"Why not?"

"Because I wanted you here. I hated your going away."

"I wish I hadn't gone!" said the boy.

The girl was instantly curious. "Do you wish you hadn't gone because I didn't want you to go, or because you didn't have a good time?"

"No. I suppose I put in an excellent time on the whole."

THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE 189

"If you want to tell me all about it, tell me," said Effie, very keen to know.

"It won't bore you?"

"Oh! it won't really bore me. Did you buy your socks and ties?"

"Yes!"

"How many?"

"A dozen of both."

"A dozen! I don't believe father has had as many as a dozen in his life."

"I lied to the parson," thought Archie. "Good God, I lied to the parson!"

"And did you find your friend much changed?"

"Old Win? Rather, I hardly knew him. I should have passed him if I'd seen him in the street."

"What's happened to him, then?"

"India, and—and the Service. From being a man with some individuality he's developed into a type."

"You liked him—as much as before?"

"When I found him—or the remains of him. Yes. But really and truly, talking to him was rather like talking to a regiment, not a man. I felt that all his brother officers answered when he answered. He had a most curious effect on me."

"Did he? What?"

"Well, thinking back, I'm perfectly certain that I was afraid to be myself, that I gradually became him."

"How?"

"I mean, I became a cavalry man too, for the time."

"How do you become a cavalry man?"

The boy gave a laugh. He was now talking quickly to get in front of his self-disgust and humiliation.

"Oh!" he said, "you stiffen your back, arms, and legs, make your tongue very heavy, check any desire you may have either to tell anything or ask anything, and think hard all the time about good form. It's not easy for a civilian."

"I can't imagine you passing for five minutes as a cavalry man," said Effie. "Did you have to put up with 'dear old Win' all day?"

"No. In the evening we dined with two ladies."

"Ladies!"

"Rather!"

"Who were they?"

"A mother who was just old enough to be a daughter, and a daughter who was almost too old to be a mother."

"I know," laughed Effie. "We've got two down here."

"Don't ask me to meet them."

"All right, I won't. If they hadn't been away they would have taken jolly good care to meet you. What theatre did you go to?"

"Gaiety."

"A new play?"

"No. The old play with new dresses and another title. Managers are afraid to put on new plays. They all put on one new play, and go on producing it, written by other people, until no one will venture near the theatre, and then they join the Committee to form a National Theatre and call the public fools."

"That's all Dutch to me," said Effie. "And I don't think that you really know what you're talking about."

The boy laughed for the first time that morning. They swung over the gate, swished through twenty

yards of long grass, yellow with buttercups and red with sorrel, to the tee. The sand in the boxes was dry and powdery, and the ground was cracked here and there as though there had been no rain for a month.

Archie looked round the now familiar landscape with affection and a boyish sense of something that he did not diagnose as security, but which was security all the same.

The green, quiet meadows, cut carefully and regularly, except in patches here and there, were flat, and to an unobservant eye uninteresting. To no eye could they be ugly. There were streams everywhere, and with the streams, like gipsies with their caravans, struggled willows of odd shapes, thorn bushes, all wild and untrimmed, and elders which had never known the knife, with uncountable wild things springing up at their feet. In the far corner to the left stood an old mill with its sheds and outbuildings, its mill-race weed covered and moss grown, its windows broken, its roofs bald in patches, its walls crumbling. Its quiet persistence, its dogged determination to show a brave front to the bad times into which it had fallen, gave that touch of poetry to its corner which is given to however dank and sordid a slum by the upright figure of a brave old man with a medal on his ragged waistcoat and matches in his hands. The white bodies of just sheared sheep gleamed between the trees and bushes or stood out boldly against the low horizon line. Larks rose and made the air tremble with the wild passion of their song, and slow-flying rooks, heavy of wing, high up, gave out their raucous melancholy call. Everywhere sky.

If the boy had been alone, he would have gone down

upon the bosom of the only mother he had known, buried his face in her grasses, and cried the bitterness of his disappointment out of his heart. But here at his elbow stood a young, straight creature in all the sweetness of griefless youth, abrim with energy, vitality, and careless joy.

Through her incessant chatter and her merry laugh the breeze and the birds and the running water whispered in his ear, "You lied to Harry Pemberton. You lied to Harry Pemberton. You had your chance but you have failed."

The boy struggled fiercely to get the better of wounded ego, and laughed loudly and talked quickly, and smote the ball with all his strength. But his temperament was so sensitive, his nervous system so susceptible to the variations of hope or despondency, that the struggle was a poor one.

He played four holes as badly as they could be played. But when he was addressing his ball at the fifth tee—the tee that was the fifth of their nine holes—he suddenly let the driver slip out of his hands.

Effie had driven, and was sitting on the sand-box chaffing the boy for his feeble play. Suddenly she saw an expression of frightful despondency spread over Archie's face.

"It's no good," he said. "I can't play. I—I wish I was dead."

His lips were trembling and his nostrils twitching, and he turned his back upon the girl.

Effie sprang up and put her arms round him and kissed him.

"What's the matter?" she cried. "What is it? What's happened?"

THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE 193

The boy caught her in his arms and held her tight for a moment. Then he pushed her away, with a touch of fright, marched over to the bags, picked them up, and slung them over his shoulders.

"Let's go home," he said. "Quickly."

They hurried back, in silence.

CHAPTER XXVI

BILL was the second to notice that something was wrong.

He had been too busy with a rat-hole to see the boy and girl leave the links a good three-quarters of an hour sooner than usual. Upon discovering that, after all, the hole was an old one, and quite useless to bother about, he had looked round to see if he were needed by his young friends, and found a deserted links.

At first he was a trifle angry. He considered that, by leaving the place without giving him a whistle, they had not played the game. Then when he thought the matter out he became hurt and felt disconsolate and neglected. Finally, as he trotted home, his feelings changed to nervousness.

"Hope to goodness," he said to himself, "there's been no accident—that one of those hard, silly little balls has not hit Effie. By Jove, I'll say one or two pretty strong things to Master Archibald if he's done any harm! Or perhaps Effie has sliced a ball into the boy? . . . I'm off."

The milkman's boy, who knew Bill slightly, saw the wire-haired terrier break from an easy trot into a sudden run and race along the road as hard as his legs would take him.

When he arrived at the Vicarage he found Cookie flinging mats, for no discoverable reason, out of the garden door. Every mat she could lay her hands on found its way every dry morning out on the path. There it lay for varying spaces of time, until, without shaking or beating, it found itself back with its brothers and sisters in its accustomed place.

"Don't you come in 'ere with them filthy feet," she cried.

"Fussy," said Bill.

"No you don't," she said, dodging so that the dog should not shoot past her into the house.

"You bore me stiff," said Bill, "and if you knew how idiotic you look you wouldn't do it—and at your time of life, too!"

"I know all about that," said Cookie, who had always been just a little jealous of Bill, though she fed him regularly and liked him as much as she did all animals. "Go and lie in the sun and get dry. I've spoken to you before about messing up my oilcloth. Think I 'aven't got enough to do without your muckin' things up? . . . You saucy monkey, I'll give you one for that!"

Bill had made a feint, and then a dash, and was in the passage and up the stairs.

"You cook well," he said, "but you're a blazing nuisance."

"My word, what cunnin'!" growled Cookie. She caught up the water-trough, and deliberately threw the water into the sink. Then she filled it again, and put it back in its place.

Bill held his nose down to the crack of Harry's bedroom door, satisfied himself that Best-of-All was in

bed, repeated the process at Effie's door, and heard her walking up and down her room, and went to Archie's door, pushed it open, found the room empty, and ran downstairs again.

"Bill-bill-bill," sang out Cookie, in a sweet, wheedling voice.

Bill went in a gingerly manner into the kitchen. Cookie pointed to the trough. Bill looked at her out of the corners of his eyes for a moment, saw nothing of guile in the funny old face, and drank long and deeply.

"Good old Cookie," he said, the water dripping from his small Imperial. "One of the very, very, best."

Archie came in from the garden, and hesitated outside the parson's den.

"Bless me," said Cookie, "what's the matter with you two young things this mornin'?"

"Nothing's the matter," said Archie.

"Tell me another," said Cookie. "You've 'ad words, or somethink. Why, you're back any amount of time before you oughter be. 'Ave a cuper tea, dear?"

"No thanks, Cookie. I'll wait for breakfast."

"Just as you fancy, but it won't take me a jiffy to get yer one. Come on. You may as well. You look tired."

"You're awfully kind, Cookie, but I'd rather wait. Mr. Pemberton's not down yet, I suppose?"

"God bless the boy, why, pore feller, I only 'eard him go up ter bed an hour ago! Kep' up all night by one or other of his bright specimens, I s'pose. I'd strap 'im down to 'is bed if I was the missus. All the troubles in the world can be seen to in twelve hours

of daylight, I say. Come on, 'ave a nice cuper tea, Mr. Archie."

The boy sat down on an old, dirty armchair.

"Right oh, Cookie," he said wearily.

"'Ere, watch it!" laughed Cookie. "You *may* 'ave plumped down on a piece of butter."

"I don't care."

"Well, of course, if you *want* a fixed mark on your trousers——"

She took up a long iron rod with a hook and raked a circle of iron out of its place, making, as she always made, a tremendous amount of totally unnecessary noise. Then she jabbed down a cup and saucer on the untidy table, and went over to the sink with a tea-pot.

"You 'ad a few words with your father yesterday?" she said.

"No. I didn't see my father."

"Oh. Then you backed an 'orse and went down."

"Didn't have a bet."

"Then you're sickenin' for somethink."

"No. I'm as fit as a fiddle."

There was a long pause, but a continuance of totally unnecessary noise. The boiling kettle bubbled fiercely. She lifted it off, and poured the steaming water into the tea-pot.

"I've got it," she said at last, cocking her one good eye at the boy. "You're in love."

"I've been in love for weeks," said Archie simply, "but, as I've no right to be, I just recognise the fact, as I recognise that the sun sets and the moon rises and one sleeps and wakes, and leave it at that. I am worried, mighty worried, but not about that."

She handed him the cup of tea.

"Poor boy!" she said. "I can lend you two pound sixteen if that's any good."

"Thank you, Cookie. You're a Briton. But it isn't money."

"Well," she said, leaning on the table, "then I give it up. If it ain't love and it ain't money and it ain't illness, I don't see what it can be. Oh, 'old on, I've forgot the sugar!"

She waddled across to him and held out a basin. Archie took two lumps and stirred the tea mechanically, looking fixedly into the cup.

Cookie eyed him sympathetically. So did Bill. Presently he drank the tea, nodded to cook with a strangely unsmiling face, and went out into the garden.

As he paced the lawn, Effie watched him from her window. So did Helen.

"What is the matter?" Effie asked herself anxiously.

"What in the world's wrong?" asked Cookie inwardly.

"Something's up," thought Bill.

Helen turned to Harry, who was reading the paper in bed.

"Harry."

"Yes, darling?"

"Is anything the matter with Archie?"

"Don't think so. Why?"

"He's not a bit like himself this morning, and I don't think that he and Effie have been playing as usual."

"Where is he?"

"Walking up and down the lawn, alone."

Harry yawned, stretched widely, dropped the paper on the floor, got out of bed, and strode to the window.

For a moment or two he studied the slow-moving boy intently.

"I wonder what's the matter?" he said.

He went to the bathroom. No singing and no whistling rose above the pouring or the splashing of water.

Archie heard the bath water gurgling down the pipe and went into the parson's study, shut the door, and sat down at his desk. He took up one of his books, and saw nothing. For twenty minutes he sat waiting for the parson's step on the stairs. When he heard it, he got up, with a determined expression, and stood on the rug in front of the old-fashioned empty fireplace fidgeting his fingers.

Harry entered.

"Hullo, old boy!" he said.

"I lied to you, just now, sir," said Archie.

"Did you? Why?"

Harry put his two kind hands on the boy's shoulders.

"Because I've been trained to lie," burst out the boy, "and I haven't broken myself of the habit. I forgot that I wasn't talking to one of the men who wouldn't believe me if I told the truth. If I'd said that I didn't come down last night because I missed my train, I should have been called a liar by one of them. They would immediately have suspected me of some rot. So from force of habit I was afraid to tell the simple truth, and invented Win's fever. Hit me in the face. Knock me down. Hurt me vilely. I want you to."

Harry looked at the boy's eyes. They were full of tears. He saw that his mouth trembled, and that his hands were clenched.

"It's going to be a hot day," he said quietly.

He moved to his desk and shifted a bundle of papers. He wanted to give the boy time to become his own master. For several moments he was extremely busy, doing things that were not necessary. Then he took up a driver, and swung it to the danger of the chairs and shelves.

"Old boy," he said quietly, "have you ever been to Westminster Abbey?"

"Yes," said Archie.

"Have you ever wondered how long and arduously men must have worked to have built up that gorgeous place?"

"Yes," said the boy.

"You've been trying to build an abbey before you've laid all the foundation stones. . . . This is an excellent club. Plenty of spirit. . . . See what I mean?"

"Have I laid any foundation stones at all?"

"Several of the most important, and, better still, you know which one you haven't laid."

He put the driver in a corner, went back to the boy and wrapped his arm round him.

"Go easy, Archie," he said. "Give yourself time, old man. The stucco building, the imitation affair that you were made to put up by your silly fool architects, is demolished. Don't be afraid. Don't press. Don't try and break records. I'll back you to win after you have trained a bit more."

The boy's voice was infinitely glad. "Then you—you don't despise me, sir? You won't let this affair ever make you suspect me?"

"My dear fellow," replied Harry, "I'm your friend, not your task master, or drill-sergeant! I go through

every day what you've just been going through, and I thank God for it. It's my only chance of ever becoming all I hope to be. A man's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's a Heaven for ? ”

“ You're—you're most awfully kind.”

“ It was very kind of you to have told me,” said Harry. He patted the boy on the shoulder, and pointed to the word on the old card that hung over the mantel-board.

“ Before this develops into a Mutual Admiration Society,” he added lightly, “ let's go and have some eggs and bacon.”

CHAPTER XXVII

AFTER breakfast Harry returned to his study, sat down at his desk—Archie, pipe in mouth, was working steadily the other end of the room—and wrote between thirty and forty short notes.

The first one ran as follows :

“ DEAR MRS. BENN,—

“ A new-born baby, the child of a young girl who is herself not much more than a baby, is to be buried to-morrow at eleven o’clock. I want you to come, if you can, to the church to help me and to listen to something that I want to tell you in the vestry afterwards.

“ H. PEMBERTON.”

Mrs. Benn was a young woman newly married to Walter Benn, a gas-fitter. The remaining letters contained the same words, and were addressed to young women with young children.

Effie, wonderingly, put the letters in a little bag, and started off to deliver them. Helen found a similar letter in her workbasket. It was not quite the same. It began “ Dearest,” and ended with “ Your devoted Harry.”

Harry got on his bicycle and rode down to the *Albert Edward*.

He remained in the little cabin for half an hour. He then went to the grocer's and bought several tins of mock-turtle soup, returned to the barge with them, and left them with Mrs. Lemmins. His next visit was to William Burges, the builder and contractor, who furnished funerals; and so back to the Vicarage.

He found the gardener cutting the lawn.

"Collins," he said, "I want you to pick a big bunch of lilies to-morrow morning at ten o'clock, tie them loosely together, and take them down to the towpath at the foot of the bridge. You'll find the *Albert Edward* lying there. Give them to Mrs. Lemmins."

In the afternoon he went back to the barge. Mary Anne was very young, and he was anxious. She had been lying in a heavy sleep all the morning, utterly exhausted.

No one knew what Mary Anne had thought and done since the man had left her four months before she stumbled into the cabin of the *Albert Edward* and stood in front of the startled Mrs. Lemmins with a last flicker of defiance in her big blue eyes.

For six months after she had slipped away from the tow-path with the curly-headed, dark-eyed son of the lock-keeper in an ecstasy of romanticism she had lived in one room in Drury Lane. The man drank and shouted brutal words. He worked in fits and starts down at the docks, and packed Mary Anne out to keep him by selling flowers. She loved him and worked. She loved him and hoped. She loved him, and faced the grim, stern, long days bravely, desperately. She could have left him, and gone back to her mother at

any time that she had chosen ; but she loved him and stayed.

Her golden hair and big blue eyes sold her flowers so well that the man very quickly gave up working. Her golden hair and big blue eyes had fired this man's desire. They now, the object attained, showed him the way to laziness and comparative luxury. Mary Anne had hitherto been the weak, clinging, fascinated girl, as ready to work as to forgive. His unspeakably abominable proposal, flung at her head in a sober moment in the coarse, plain language of his class, brought her dream clattering about her ears. She told him of her condition, made her appeal, her passionate outburst of blame, listened dully to his calm statement of fact, and stood among the wreckage of her romance, alone but for the gaunt figures of disillusion, misery, and remorse.

But not alone. She was never in all the wanderings through the streets and out into the still, sullen country alone. There was that wonderful sweet something, that mysterious stirring something, to whisper to, to live for, to make plans about.

Always near the canal, and always frightened to find the *Albert Edward*, Mary Anne earned her precarious bread and water by cleaning doorsteps and doing mendings. Her golden hair and big blue eyes won many a glass of milk and hunk of bread and meat and night's lodging.

When vital young Spring pushed decrepit, hard-dying Winter from the lanes and hedges, Mary Anne found her bed among last year's leaves and under cowsheds and hay-stacks.

" I reckon this will do nicelee for us," she would say.

At last these two went aboard the *Albert Edward*,

and Mary Anne told. She cared nothing for herself, but everything for the baby.

In the afternoon Harry was sitting by the bunk, upon which Mary Anne lay when she opened her eyes. The heavy eyelids rose and fell weakly, ungladly. There was nothing of joy or hope in the big, blue, tired eyes for some moments. Then they opened quickly and remained open, and a light came into them that was very soft and tender. Her hands felt about for something, and she made a crooning sound as she felt.

With an agonised expression and a hungry cry she tried to sit up, struggled to sit up.

"My baby!" she whispered angrily—"my baby!"

Harry bent over her.

"Sssh! little mother," he said. "Baby's asleep."

Mary Anne slipped back, and a smile crept over her face. Her big blue eyes opened and closed, opened, flickered, and didn't open.

She gave a long, contented sigh, and went to sleep again, crooning sometimes in her dreams and smiling always.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ALL the women were mothers who stood round the tiny grave except one. In a rich, vibrating voice Harry read the beautiful simple service for the dead. Helen placed the lilies softly upon the little coffin and with them her tears.

There were no tears in the eyes of Mrs. Lemmins.

Many of the other women wept. They had stood round the graves of children of their own—little ones who had slipped out of life before they had known any of its beauties or its horrors, its joys or its griefs.

Among the branches of the old yews, which spread their protecting arms above the unremembered as well as the beloved dead, birds sang their merry songs. Bees busied among the flowers that grew upon the graves, humming their work-day songs, and the air was full of singing.

Harry dropped a handful of earth upon the coffin, turned, and made his way slowly into the old cool church, in which the people of East Brenton had been christened, married, and put to sleep for over five hundred years. All the women followed him into the vestry.

They found Harry standing up with his hands behind his back. They stood hesitating for a moment, and one after another sat down upon the chairs arranged round the walls.

When the shuffling of feet ceased, Harry spoke.

"In that little coffin," he said, "lies the body of a baby without a name, who would have been called the child of sin—wrongly called the child of sin. It was not the child of sin, but of ignorance, and for its birth you, every one of you, is to blame, and I as much as any. Its mother is a child. It will be said of her that she has 'gone wrong.' She will be pointed at and sneered at and giggled at, and a stigma will hang to her dress like a burr. But she is blameless. The one who is most to blame is her mother. If she had told poor little Mary Anne the reason of her motherhood, a spotless life would not have been stained; God would not hear the agonised cry of a childless mother, and that little grave would never have been dug. . . . My dear mothers and future mothers, for God's sake who loves little children, tell your children the truth! Never forget that little grave for which every one of us is responsible. If you don't wish your girls to go through what Mary Anne Lemmins has suffered, tell them the truth. Don't lie or quibble to spare yourselves. There will be a grave in your lives if you do. Not they but you will be to blame if any one of your daughters, in future, gets into trouble. Never forget that little grave. When your daughters are still young, put your arms round them, and tell them what it means to be a woman. Let innocence remain in your homes by thrusting out ignorance. Let them know and understand the great responsibility that is theirs, the great gift with which they have been born. Keep them modest by permitting yourselves no false modesty. You are all good women. Be good mothers. Never forget that little grave. God bless you!"

CHAPTER XXIX

HARRY PEMBERTON and Helen returned to the Vicarage. Neither spoke. All Helen's sympathies were with the golden-haired, blue-eyed child who would wake to find that although she was a mother she had no baby. She was silent because there were tears in her throat.

Harry was silent because he had not recovered from, and would not recover from for a long time, the shock he had received from Mary Anne when she told him the point of view of the father of her child. It was so obviously the true point of view, especially in relation to Mary Anne, that he could do nothing but reproach himself for never having discovered it.

"There is Effie," he repeated inwardly, again and again—"there is Effie."

Harry followed Helen up to her bedroom.

He sat down by the open window. Effie and Archie were playing in a set of tennis before luncheon. Both young faces shone with health and animal spirits. Both were playing hard and extremely well and with deadly earnestness.

Helen stood in front of the glass and took off her hat.

"Poor little Mary Anne!" she said—"poor little Mary Anne!"

"Does Effie know?" asked Harry.

"Know what, dear?"

"Everything—all that there is to know—the truth!"

Helen turned with a look of amazement on her pretty face.

"I thought that the—the things you told our women to tell their girls, applied to—their girls only. You surely don't mean that I am to tell—— Oh! you can't mean——"

Harry rose, strode over to his wife, and put his hands on her shoulders.

"Then Effie is as ignorant as poor little Mary Anne?"

"Yes, I—I hope—I mean I——"

She hesitated, stopped, and her eyes fell to the ground.

"Go on, darling!"

"Oh, Harry, it's—it's so difficult!"

"Difficult?" echoed Harry gently—"difficult? Is there such a word in the dictionary you use? I have never found it there."

"Effie is different from those girls. She is refined and good and——"

"She is a woman, she is a human being."

"Don't you trust her?"

"It is her right to know."

"But——"

"There is no but, darling."

"There is a but, Harry, there is—in Effie's case. She has no temptation."

"How do we know that?"

Helen's eyes took on a startled expression. "You mean—Archie," she said.

"No, I don't. I mean any one. We know nothing of Effie's mind on this point. We only know that she

is nineteen and over, that if she is a healthy girl she has, whether she knows it or not, the maternal instinct. Have you never spoken to her on the matter ? ”

“ No—it—it isn’t done.”

For the first time in their married life Harry showed anger with his wife.

“ It isn’t done ! ” he cried—“ it isn’t done ! It wasn’t done by Mrs. Lemmins. Is the innocence of her girl of a less refined order than the innocence of ours ? It isn’t done ! Nearly everything that isn’t done ought to be done. All our working lives you and I have been fighting with that cowardly sentiment. It must be, and shall be, done, and you must do it, at once.”

Helen’s eyes filled with tears.

Harry caught her in his arms, and covered her face with kisses.

“ Forgive me, darling. I didn’t mean to speak angrily to you of all precious people in the world. But if there is one expression in our language that makes me stiffen, ‘ it isn’t done ’ is the one. Kiss me.”

She kissed him, and put her arms round him.

“ Helen,” he went on, “ never in my life have I been so humbled and ashamed as I am to-day. Mary Anne’s case is not the first by a hundred that has filled us with pity. How many of these might never have occurred if the girl had known what she was doing—if she had had even the glimmering of an idea of what it leads to ? The village is filled with young, pale girls who may be standing on the verge of the same catastrophe—and Effie is one of them. She and all of them ask for the truth every time they see their mothers, whether they know it or not, and never get it—because

it isn't done. They are taught not to put their fingers in the fire because it will burn them. They are taught not to play with knives, and to keep away from water. Let them burn themselves, let them cut their fingers, let them run the risk of drowning, but, for God's sake don't let them, for want of elementary teaching on the most vital of all questions, run the risk of ruin ! ”

“ But if a girl is clean-minded——”

“ Who's to know that she's clean-minded ? Who's to know that nature hasn't punished her by giving her desires as strong as those of men ? ”

“ Such a girl as that will not remain innocent, whether she knows or not.”

“ That's not true. That's a sweeping assertion, an uncharitable idea. Here and there, of course, there are poor girls to whom morality and innocence mean nothing under the stress of their natures. But to ninety-nine out of a hundred virtue means everything. Ignorance is virtue's most cunning enemy, and I say now—I wish with all my soul that I had said it twenty years ago—that a woman who lets her daughter struggle blindly through the awakening years of her womanhood is not fit to be a mother.”

The parson's agitation made him stride about the room.

“ There is not a home in this place where the truth is told. Not one, poor or middle class. There is hardly a home in England where it is told. You say so. You said ‘ it isn't done. ’ We educate, we advance, we are broad-minded in all unessential things, but this—this thing, the very root of all life and happiness—this is kept a secret. The great, big, essential thing is simpered about and whispered about behind people's

backs, made a disgusting mystery of, treated as a thing either to be ashamed of or indulged in in hidden places. Boys may be told, but not girls! Why, we foster the ruin of women, we encourage immorality, we put a premium on suicide and ruin and murder by clinging to this vile and cruel convention. If mothers are too ashamed of being mothers to tell their daughters that they also will one day be mothers, if their modesty is so nice, their sense of decency so acute that they can't open their lips on a matter that will and must be of the first importance to their girls, then let there be classes in the schools, let there be paid lecturers to go from place to place. Because it isn't done, mothers, doctors, clergymen, teachers, conspire to keep up the conventional mystery about the one great thing which ought not to be a mystery. No more of this for me. I will leave no woman in this place in peace until she has done the greatest duty of her motherhood. If there are to be any more little graves in this place, any more poor, nameless, harmless children on this green, it shall not be through ignorance. I will insist upon the truth, and, please God! I have enough years before me to make up for some of my lost time."

Harry stopped, and once again put his arms round his wife. "Darling," he said, "no man can tell what he will do under temptation. No woman can tell what she may do in ignorance. Never in my life shall I forget what Mary Anne told me two nights ago. Effie—might have been Mary Anne. Effie—think of it! I won't argue round the subject from its wide point of view, or go into how it may affect the people whose lives I long to make brighter outside the house. I will stamp about and generalise no more. As Effie's father

I ask you just this. Are you going to be brave enough to do something that isn't done, rise above a rotten convention, and put yourself to the distress and discomfort of telling the truth to Effie—or will you leave it to me ? ”

“ I will tell her,” said Helen.

PART II

CHAPTER I

BILL lay under an apple-tree. The late August sun beat down upon the dry, hard lawn. Every now and then an apple fell with a thud. Peaches blushed upon the walls of the kitchen garden, pears hung heavily from their branches, and plums, swollen and almost blue, tried to hide behind their leaves. Holly-hocks had grown to their full height, and were bee-attended at all hours of the day.

Sunflowers, just as tall, were bending their heavy, languid heads, and the lavender bushes had spread widely. Geraniums, perkily erect, red and pink and white, made lines of colour upon the beds, and herbaceous borders gluttled the eye with a feast of colour.

Bill found the shade grateful, and his soul was filled with a great content.

There was the chimney-sweep's dog—a vicious, ill-bred, ragamuffinly, quick-darting beast of a fellow—who had acquired the low habit of sneaking into the Vicarage garden and killing young chickens. Bill had spoken to him sternly several times. The visits continued. A very promising young cockerel had been found dead and mauled on the other side of the

meadow wall. Bill made no further remarks. He spent sleepless nights and watchful days. At five o'clock that August morning, as he was lying in the long grass near the chicken house, he had heard the grass moving softly, and saw the brown, ugly body of the thief making slowly towards a fat white pullet which was getting an appetite for breakfast. Crouching low, Bill had watched his opportunity, made one bound, caught Master Mongrel by the scruff of his neck, and given him a dusting so complete and thorough that it would remain a memory with him for the remainder of his days.

As he lay full stretch under the apple-tree and thought about this, it was with a most excusable feeling of pride. His labours had been rewarded. Next time he met mongrel in the village, there would be no interchange of polite inquiries as to health, but a quick disappearance. That was good.

Also, thank heaven! Best-of-All was himself again. Some weeks before he had watched him anxiously. He had gone to meet him when he returned from the church, and had had no greeting. He had listened to the sound of voices in the bedroom. Once Best-of-All had spoken to him as he had then spoken to Helen. Once.

He had been a hobbledehoy. He had discovered a new box of Black Dots, and, thinking, greenly, that Black Dots were naturally only bought for pups to play with, had carefully bitten as many holes in all of them as he was able.

He had watched Best-of-All after that interview with his wife with sympathetic anxiety, especially when he was alone in his den with the door shut. He had

watched him, after every one had gone to bed, sit at his desk with his face between his hands for hours at a stretch without moving, making no sound except an occasional deep sigh that was almost a groan. And he had several times left the room without a word to Bill. Not even a cushion stuffed with the best feathers, in a chair in the best of all rooms, made up for that.

However, that was over. Best-of-All had been his usual breezy, energetic, cheery self again for many weeks. "Heigh ho! life's a doocid, excellent institution," thought Bill.

And then, as to that young fellow, Archie. Bill had always considered that that visit of his to London had something queer about it. There had been another talk with the door shut and Bill on the wrong side. But Best-of-All's voice had been very kind that time. It was the boy's voice that came loud and shakily. How these two-legged creatures loved to talk! Something had been very wrong, of course, and not only the boy, but Effie, Helen, and Cookie had been far from cheerful people that morning. However, the air had cleared when Best-of-All came into the dining-room arm-in-arm with the boy, and no more holes had been cut before breakfast by Effie and Archie.

Of course, the boy stewed over his books far too much, Bill considered, and had quite entirely ceased to throw him chaffy remarks, and make noises through his teeth, to egg him on to think that a stray cat was about the place, while he was working. He seemed to like his job now, if Bill knew anything about it at all. What a pull a dog has over a poor beggar of a boy!

Effie was full of beans too, that Bill was delighted to acknowledge. It made a lot of difference to him,

Best-of-All always being out and about. He had to confess to himself though, as he reviewed the position lazily and with intense satisfaction, that he wasn't perfectly certain that Helen hadn't got something, some little thing, on her mind. He admired and even loved Helen. First of all she was the wife of Best-of-All. That was good enough for him. She was also awfully sweet and gentle and thoughtful and quiet and mighty good to Best-of-All. That warmed his heart towards her. And yet he had always been just a bit uncomfortable with her. When he rushed in it seemed to him that she looked at his feet, and although she never said a word, she made him self-conscious. He wasn't sure—he hardly liked to criticise the wife of Best-of-All, a collie might do a thing of that sort, a hirsute, useless, decorative thing, or a hound of sorts always beastly superior in their methods—but perhaps she was just a shade too perfect to be an entirely satisfactory person to have about the house. Mind you, he didn't say so. No. And he didn't think so. It was a vague suggestion, a shadow of an idea. He had noticed that, since that bedroom talk, she had been rather dumpy when working alone in the afternoon; that she had eyed Effie rather nervously, had several times hesitatingly begun to talk to her, and had always seemed relieved, though not satisfied, when something had demanded Effie's immediate attention elsewhere. It might be mere excess of imagination on his part.

He stretched himself and yawned lazily. The world was very good all round.

The mill hooter went.

"Hullo!" thought Bill, "time I had a drink."

Before he had pulled himself together to go into the

kitchen he heard the crunch of boots upon the path. He rose with dignity, prepared to ask questions.

It was all right, however. The little, thin, wispy man dressed in shabby, shiny black had the run of the house. Father O'Shaughnessy spent many of his evenings in the den with Best-of-All, talking and laughing and smoking.

The little man walked quickly. His thin, bird-like face, cut into everywhere with short lines, wore a worried look, not devoid of temper. He carried a queer black straw hat. His pointed bald head, from which wisps of grey hair hung, glistened in the sun.

"Ah, Bhill," he said, "where's ye Massther?"

"Here I am, old fellow," shouted Harry from the den. "Come in."

Bill was up and in the den through the window before the priest had got within thirty yards of the garden door.

"You back?" said Bill. "I think you might have let me know."

Harry gave him a playful punch.

"Come in, Father," said the parson, "and have some luncheon with us."

The little priest entered the room stiffly, and stood straight up in a slightly melodramatic attitude, with his hands behind his back and his eyes on Harry's outstretched hand.

"Mr. Pemberton," he said, "you and I have bin intimate frinds for as near eighteen yeers as makes no manner uv difference."

"And I hope we shall be just as intimate for another eighteen," said Harry heartily.

The priest did not permit himself to be melted by

the parson's charm of manner. Being Irish, and therefore having a grievance, he had no desire to anticipate the end of his interview at the very beginning of it. He knew perfectly well that he and Harry, whatever he might say now, would part if possible more cordial friends than ever. But having seized with angry delight upon something which required explanation, he had carefully and hotly rehearsed an indignant outburst, and he almost shuddered to think that anything should deprive him of the intense enjoyment of ventilating it.

Harry was immediately sorry that he had made any friendly remark. The priest and he had met daily, sometimes hourly, in their work in the parish—their work in which Harry never permitted the slightest suggestion of rivalry. He knew the priest's typical Irish character well. A dozen times in as many years the little man had entered his room in precisely the same way with precisely the same grievance. The kindest thing, as well as the most diplomatic thing, was to let him get rid of his seething eloquence.

Father O'Shaughnessy grew red in the face.

"At the moment, d'ye see," he said, raising his voice, "Oi misdoubt whether we shall iver shake the hand in frindship again."

Harry played up like a sportsman. "Indeed!" he said. "May I ask why?"

"Ut's the pwly that I've entered yer house to tell ye this moment."

"Pray be seated, Father O'Shaughnessy," said Harry stiffly, shooting a wink at Bill.

"Oi wud rather stand," replied the priest. "Ut's the man Magee, Tim Magee, that works on and off in de

brickfields over by de 'Paddington Packet,' that Oi'm afther speakin' to ye about—Tim Magee, born a good Catholic, thanks be to God, and de sooner he dies a Catholic de better, for he's a dhirty, time-servin', cadgin' fellahr."

"Tim Magee—oh yes! Well?"

"But ut isn't whell, d'ye see," cried the priest. "Ut's far from bein' whell. The mattahr is loikely to put up a wall uv bittehr blood between two old an' dhear friends."

"Pray explain yourself," said Harry icily.

"Haven't Oi bin explainin' meself all de time? Oi tell ye ut's Magee, Tim Magee, that's the whole troubil, wan uv de most devout simpil creatures iver put upon dis earth, de dhirty blackguard. Ask yersilf pwhy Oi condescend to darken the threshold of ye house at all, havin' by ye grace uv God discovered ye base machinations to wrest from the throe fold the soul uv this same Tim Magee. Ask yersilf, Mr. Pembherton."

Harry forced back his laughter. Not for worlds would he deprive the great-hearted, hard-working, simple little man of an atom of enjoyment.

"Am I to believe, Father O'Shaughnessy," he said, with the utmost gravity, "that you accuse me of seducing Tim Magee into my church?"

"An' ut's jist that Oi'm askin' ye to believe, though Oi hope ye'll refuse to believe ut wid all yer might an' main. Ut's bin reported ter me that Tim Magee was seen in your church three Sunday evenings runnin', havin', the dhirty villain, bin properly to mass each Sunday mornin' like the devout Catholic that he is. Mr. Pembherton, Oi ask ye, d'ye see, without any heat or tempher, is that a ting that Oi can sit tight under?"

"My dear Father, it's disgraceful. I assure you, on my word of honour, not only that I don't want Tim Magee, but that I won't have Tim Magee. Next time I see him in my church, if it's in the middle of my sermon, I'll get down from the pulpit, take him by the scruff of his bull neck and seat of his breeches, and pitch him out into the road."

The priest went off into a sudden shrill peal of laughing. He clapped his hands on his knees, bent double, and walked about the room. Tears streamed from his eyes. It was a minute before he could speak.

When he had recovered, he held out both hands to Harry. "Oi truly believe ye would too, me dear frind," he said. "And ut's meself that would dearly loike to see ye do ut."

And so the little comedy ended, as it always ended, with peace and friendship.

"You will lunch, old fellow?"

"Many thanks, Oi shall be simply deloighted."

Bill followed.

"Well," he said to himself, "human beings *are* rummuns! I suppose it's because they've only got two legs, or something."

CHAPTER II

THAT afternoon another and a heavier step on the gravel made Bill look up.

He saw a well set-up, stout man, respectably dressed in a tight-fitting tweed suit, march round the garden with Cookie. Besides wearing a black dress with a rose pinned upon her bosom, she wore a proud, proprietary smile.

They were hand in hand, these two, as they had every right to be, for they had been engaged to be married for twenty years.

Collins, the gardener, who had sampled Cookie's cooking every morning for five of these engaged years, and was a bachelor earning twenty-five shillings a week, and a good deal more by the sale of such fruit, vegetables, and flowers from the Vicarage garden as would not be missed, as is the way of gardeners, had proposed to Cookie once a month, with persistent regularity. Certainly he chose Saturday night upon which to do so, and was, therefore, made bold by an extra quart of old ale, but he knew cooking when he tasted it. He also knew Cookie, and found much to admire in the brown of her hair, and the shrewd turn of her tongue and in the unquenchable generosity of

her nature. That only one of her eyes was useful and few of her front teeth remained seemed to him to weigh nothing against her palpable advantages.

"Fred Jennings," he had said again and again. "Well! 'e calls 'isself a man, don't 'e? 'Ow many years 'as 'e been a-walkin' art?"

"Oh! you eat your meal and leave Fred Jennings alone. He's all right."

"All right? I *don't* think. Very much all right is Fred Jennings. Keep you waitin' twenty years before puttin' you into ther merried stite, and takes your wiges when 'e's art ov work. All right, not arf. When am I goin' to be best man, Cookie?"

And Cookie would prune herself and giggle and say: "Ah! you never know. Keep your top 'at dusted."

But Christmas succeeded Christmas, midsummer followed midsummer, and Fred Jennings came down once a fortnight from London, but never fixed the day.

There were other men in the village who would gladly have led the funny little woman to church. There was big Dick Turner who worked in the Brewery and made good money, who had long ago buried his wife, and sent his children out into the world. And there was Mr. MacFall, the dog fancier, with a shop in Seven Dials, and three rooms over the wheelwright's. Quite a catch was Mr. MacFall, with a most wonderful way of finding stray dogs of some value.

But Cookie remained true to Fred Jennings year in, year out. When he was out of work, as he was sometimes for weeks together, not only her savings, but the whole of her wages went regularly to London in one of the parson's envelopes.

Fred Jennings had proposed to Cookie when he was a slim, smart fellow, who carried a ring on his little finger, and knew a horse when he saw it, and wore a collar every day of the week. And she had never forgotten to be grateful.

There had been dreadful moments during these long twenty years for the little woman who loved once and remained in love. Fred Jennings had walked out with a young woman in service at the London house of a Member of Parliament, and Cookie's pillow had been wet with tears for many nights. But Fred Jennings had returned repentant, and been freely forgiven.

No one believed that Fred Jennings meant marriage as time went on. Even Cookie sometimes doubted it. But she had told curious questioners so often that "she couldn't leave the Vicar, Mr. Jennings must wait," that she had grown to believe it herself.

Fred Jennings had come down—the sight of him on a Wednesday afternoon had surprised Bill extremely—in answer to a peremptory letter from Harry Pemberton.

It had been reported to the Vicar by Mr. MacFall that Jennings had been seen at the Earl's Court Exhibition on several occasions with a young woman who worked in a tea-shop in the Edgware Road. Harry knew of this long engagement, of Cookie's unfailing generosity and constancy, and he was not going to allow, if he could help it, anything to shatter the romance of his old servant's life.

When Jennings arrived, not without nervousness, Harry was out reading "Jorrocks" to old Joe Judd, who had returned from hospital to die at home.

So Cookie, who had hurriedly dressed, took her sweetheart round the garden.

"Looks nice, don't it?" she asked, with an air of proper pride.

"Ah!" said Jennings, "I could do with this place. Soot me a treat. 'Ullo! there's Bill."

The man flicked his fat fingers.

Bill gave him a somewhat patronising nod, and remained seated. "How de do, Jennings?—how de do?" he remarked.

"Gettin' lazy," said Jennings.

"Lazy!" cried Cookie. "Not 'im. Wish 'e was. Wouldn't come 'ome of a mornin' along of Miss Effie and Mr. Archie and dirty my clean steps. He's a streak of hairy life if ever there was one. And think? Well there, it's as good as a play to watch 'im sometimes. Little devil!"

"Thought you liked 'im?"

"Like 'im? Of course I like 'im! Don't know what I should do of an evening without 'im keepin' an eye on the 'ouse when the Vicar and the Missus is away at that there club. Regular company, is Bill. Better than a man. 'E don't smoke."

"Hens laying well?" asked Jennings, looking anxiously at the Vicar's room.

"Erratic," said Cookie. "'Aven't got out of the 'abit of growin' broody yet, some of 'em. I often wonder what a hen thinks sittin' isolated for weeks at a stretch, with all them eggs under 'er. And the way some of 'em talks to their eggs, makes me feel reg'lar pappy sometimes. Fine mothers, hens."

They stood under the pergola, over which a William Allan Richardson had spread its long arms and sharp fingers. Cookie looked round, put her arms round the man's short red neck, and kissed him.

A look of remorse came into Jennings' eyes. He held the little elderly woman tight for a moment.

"Jennings!"

The two started apart.

"Sir!"

"A word with you."

Harry stood at his window, loading a pipe.

Cookie giggled, and walked past the window.

"Might 'ave coughed, mightn't you?" she said.

Harry laughed.

Jennings walked round and into the house. He tapped at Harry's door.

"Come in."

The man entered, and stood twisting his hat round and round.

"Sit down, Jennings," said Harry, shutting the door.

"Thank you, sir!" He was a loud-breathing man, with thick ankles.

Harry lit his pipe, and stood with his back to the empty grate.

"Now then, Fred Jennings," he said, "I sent for you to ask you several questions. Are you still in love with Cookie?"

The man cleared his throat. "Devoted, sir," he said.

"And you still wish to marry her?"

"It's the dream of my life, sir."

"Then why are you philandering with a tea-shop girl?"

Jennings blushed hotly, and passed the back of his left hand over his mouth. He raised his voice when he replied, "There's the law for rich and pore alike for them as commits libel——"

" You don't deny it ? "

" I do not deny as I've taken a certain young lady for a blow on the flip-flap all as innercent as innercent, same as you might——"

" Have you told Cookie ? "

" There would 'ave bin no call for me to deny it if she'd put the question, sir."

Harry was silent for a moment. " Jennings," he said, " Cookie is an old and valued friend of mine. I know what she has done for you on many occasions, and I know how much she loves *you*. She is a very good and rare woman, of whom any man might be proud. If you're telling me the truth about being devoted——"

Jennings broke in. He raised his hand above his head with a gesture that was ludicrous in its solemnity.

" It's the truth sir, if it's the last word I ever speak on earth. I love Cookie true and tender, same as I did when I asked 'er the question when we was in our prime. It ain't a fierce love as it were then. It's meller and settled, and don't worry me. It's more like the love of a man for his wife than his sweetheart, and it's all the better for that. As ter Miss James, I do admit, as between man and man—if I'm taking a liberty I ask pardon—that she ondoubtedly 'ad a fascination for me and showed a preference. My idea is that when a man's engaged to one woman and another 'as a fascination, the wise thing ter do is not to teetotal 'er, and fall into the romantic, but ter let the fascination dull off by seeing a lot of 'er. That course I persuded, and with all truth, speaking as I am to a clergyman, I can say, sittin' 'ere, that Miss James 'as seen the last of me. The fascination 'as

passed over, like summer lightning, and I'm a normal man."

"Very well then," said Harry, "make your plans to marry Cookie as soon as possible."

Jennings rose with an air of agitation.

"But I'm out of work, sir," he cried.

"I have provided for that," said Harry.

"Provided for that, sir?"

"Yes. I'm going to appoint you steward at the club, so that Cookie may be married at last. The post carries twenty-five shillings a week, and a five-roomed cottage. You will move into it the day after to-morrow, and start your duties the next day. Have you anything to say?"

The man's fat face was pale, and his voice a little husky. "Nothing, only—thank you, sir!" he said.

"I know that you are honest and sober, and will do your work well. I want you to realise, however, that I am not giving you a good, permanent job for your own sake. I am giving it to you for Cookie's sake. I want to see her married. I can rely on you to eschew fascinations in the future, Jennings?"

"You may, sir. The club and Cookie will fill my life."

"Then that's settled." Harry strode over to the door. "Cookie," he called.

"Yuss."

"I want you."

"I'm a-comin'."

There was a pause. Throwing Jennings a smile, Harry returned to his favourite place and stood with his back to the fireplace. Fred Jennings remained in a dignified attitude, sternly controlling his emotion.

Cookie ran in and drew up short. She glanced from her man to her master and back again. Her hands fluttered and her breath came quickly.

"Oh!" she said. "You two 'ave been a-quarrellin'."

"My dear Cookie, nothing of the sort. Jennings and I are better friends than ever. I asked you in because I thought that you might like to know that he has accepted the post of steward of the club, and will live in the cottage next door to it."

"Oh, Freddie!" cried Cookie.

Jennings raised his hand, and looked at the Vicar.

Harry lowered his voice. "The reason he accepted the post, my dear old Cookie, is that he can fulfil at last the great desire of his heart and make you his wife. He hopes that I can spare you. I can't, but I must. If you will both be at the church when everything is arranged, I will marry you—at last."

Cookie looked at the Vicar for a moment dully, then she took several groping steps across the room towards him, and caught up his hand between both her own.

"Oh, my dear!" she said—"oh, my dear!" Then, with the tears welling out of her eyes, she turned to Jennings and burst into a cackling laugh. "Here's a nice go!" she said. "Oo'll 'e get to make the treacle rolley-polley he dotes on so?"

CHAPTER III

HARRY PEMBERTON had been reading "Jorrocks" to old Joe Judd every afternoon for a fortnight.

These readings, which lasted a full hour, were the only bright patches in the old man's drab and melancholy days. The village, Harry, and the doctor knew that they were the last few days of a long, energetic, healthy life. The operation had been a difficult one, the patient too old to make a good recovery. Only such an old sportsman as Joe Judd, who, for all his years was as hard as iron, and whose spring of vitality seemed to be endless, could have survived the operation. He clung to life as a terrier clings to a stick. He set his teeth, stiffened his old back, and said, "Die be dagged ! It's a fight. Come on."

It was in this spirit that he returned from the hospital. It is true that he was obliged to totter up to bed the moment he entered his crowded cottage. Before obeying the local doctor's orders, however, he shook hands with all his relations and friends, and told them that he'd be at work again in a day or two. "I'll guarantee I've got a good ten years in front o' me, boys," he said. "Watch it."

But the day or two became a week, two weeks. "Not to-day," he said to his constant visitors—"not to-day. Doctor keeps me in this 'ere bed to-day. But look out for me ter-morrer."

It was always going to be to-morrow. Every to-morrow came and found him still in bed, and every day that passed left him more wasted, more shrivelled up, shriller of voice, until at last he looked like a little old monkey as he lay back, with his thin, claw-like hands clasped together, banked up with pillows, a pair of small blue eyes burning in an almost transparent face.

His sons and daughters, sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, nephews, nieces, and grandchildren watched the old man's fight with wonder, admiration, and pity.

"It ain't a bitter good," said young Alf Judd to a circle of sympathetic listeners in the "King's Head." "They've got the old man's 'ead darn, it ain't not a bitter use 'is kickin' art wif 'is legs. Accordin' to the rules of the ring 'e's done finish—knocked art. 'E much better turn it up and git art quiet."

But not a word of this was said before old Joe Judd. Neither Harry nor the doctor nor any of his friends or relations hinted or suggested that he might as well make presents of his spades and forks, rakes and scythes.

"See you up the village ter-morrer, then," they all said.

"Ah!" the old man would reply, in a more and more reedy voice. "That's me. Watch it, mate."

But the afternoon came when old Joe gave up the fight.

Harry's hour was up, and he rose from the narrow-legged, cane-bottomed chair, nearly hitting his head against a beam in the slanting ceiling as he did so.

"Good afternoon, Joe," he said. "To-morrow at the same time—unless you're down the village."

A quiet smile flickered across the painfully thin old face.

"Needn't keep it up no longer, Vicar," he said, "thank yer kindly all the sime."

"Keep what up, old man?"

"Why, that ter-morrer talk, the little gime of me goin' darn the village. I shell never go darn ther village no more. It'll be up ther village fer me, my next outin'—up ther village to old Churchyard and darn alongside Jinny."

Harry sat down again, and put his hand on the old man's shoulders. There was nothing of fretfulness, no suggestion of tears or fright or even regret in the old man's expression. Instead, there was a gleam of quiet fun in the old rip's eyes, and something in the twist of his lips that seemed to convey relief.

"You've all kep' it up fine," he added. "I argied as 'ow I cud ill put up wiv this 'ere bed in ther diy time, me never 'avin' liked much of it even o' nights, if I didn't pertend ter myself as 'ow I shud be up and abart agin ter-morrer. Didn't do no 'arm, did it, Vicar?"

"Not a bit, old fellow!" said Harry.

"Keep yer end up, Joe, I sez, sez I, and before the light fades, squeeze as many runs as yer can. The other side'll win, there ain't no manner o' doubt abart that there, but the gime is allays ter pliy fer the draw, if yer can't win, I sez. That right, Vicar?"

"Perfectly right, Joe."

"Aye. As skipper of the eleven that there's wot you've allays larned us, and many's the time I've carried out me bat. Well, sir, thank you kindly for

standin' by. The light's gorn. I can't see to take no more bowlin', and all I'm awaitin' fer is fer you to call 'draw stumps.' "

"Draw stumps," cried Harry. "Well played, sir!"

"Hooroo!" said the old man, waving his hand. He held it above his head for a moment, fingered his wrists as though taking off a pair of gloves, and fell back among his pillows.

Old Joe Judd's long innings was over, but he carried out his bat.

CHAPTER IV

AFTER a burial a wedding, and so on the world wagged—the little flat world of East Brenton.

Old Joe Judd was followed to the grave on a Monday, and on a Thursday in the same week Cookie was married.

It was, so far as East Brenton was concerned—and East Brenton was not much concerned with any other place—the wedding of the year.

Harry Pemberton had benefited by the indefatigable services of Cookie for twenty years. For the same length of time she had amused him by her shrewd tongue and affectionate familiarity. Her constancy, her patience, her invariable cheeriness, her generosity, and, more than all, her extraordinary optimism had won his respect and admiration. Harry determined to make Cookie's wedding day the red letter day of her life.

It was arranged that Cookie should be married from the Vicarage, that the wedding breakfast should take place in a marquee set up in the upper meadow, and that Cookie's brother should be asked down from London to give her away. This brother, who drove one of the few remaining two-horse omnibuses from Cricklewood

to Hammersmith, and had done so for thirty years, was her one remaining relative.

Cookie invited her own guests to the breakfast, and her list consisted of the Vicar, Mrs. Pemberton, Effie, Archie Graham, Bill (to whom a card was written), Peter Meadows (the brother), Mr. and Mrs. Joshua Higginbottom (Fred Jennings's sister and her husband), Mr. and Mrs. Stagg, gardener at the Manor House and his wife (who gave Cookie a hand twice a week in the kitchen and about the house), Collins (who, being unable to marry Cookie himself, was to act as best man to Jennings), Mr. McFall, and the other disappointed suitor, big Dick Turner from the Brewery.

Helen, Effie, and Archie Graham all entered into the affair, with Harry Pemberton, heart and soul. Helen and Effie would have set to in the kitchen to cook the breakfast, but Archie asked to be allowed, as a slight tribute to his friend Cookie, to supply the entire feast. It came over from REXBRIDGE, a meal fit for Gog and Magog, with wines and other drinks to match. He also presented Cookie with the money for her dress and hat, and oh ye Gods! what a hat it was in which she finally, fifteen minutes after the cabs from the station arrived at the Vicarage, made her appearance. A large, flat, white enormity heaped up with roses and forget-me-nots fastened with a huge brooch glistening with imitation diamonds. It will be spoken of in East Brenton with envy and awe for years. It may be said to have caused a sensation.

Helen and Effie drove through a more or less deserted village to the church, in and round which all the available inhabitants of the place were waiting.

The bells rang merrily.

Archie, in highest spirits, followed in another cab with Peter Meadows, whose beetroot face shone beneath a new white bowler and above a blue-and-white collar and a white satin tie, Mr. MacFall, whose little legs were encased in a pair of skin-tight pepper-and-salt trousers, and Dick Turner, who had blushed out in an old tall hat and frock coat several sizes too small. He had himself been married in it, twenty-eight years before.

Never in the living memory of East Brenton had the church been so tightly packed. Next to the Vicar and his wife, Cookie was the most popular person in the place. Had she not, for eighteen years, given tea to the tradesmen's boys, soup to all and sundry throughout all the winters, and taken in begging letters to the Vicar, and generally returned with something, however small?

Men, women, and children filled the pews and lined—those who were late—the path.

Cookie hopped up the aisle upon the arm of her beaming brother. Fred Jennings, resplendent in grey, with boots that squeaked with every movement, supported by Collins, washed and shaved and exuding a strong aroma of Windsor soap and shag, was waiting at the altar steps.

The organist, who was the schoolmaster, worked hard—so hard that the mechanism of the ancient organ made more noise than his instrument, groaning and creaking. And Harry, his fine, strong face burnt the colour of brick-dust, and his voice deep, rich, and vibrating, read the beautiful, simple service as no one in that church had ever heard it read before.

The scene in the vestry brought tears into the eyes

of the verger. Cookie's delight and happiness would have warmed the heart of a sphinx. She kissed everybody—Harry, Helen, Effie, Archie, Graham, Mr. Mac-Fall, Collins, Peter Meadows, Dick Turner, and the verger himself.

"Brayvo, Cookie!" cried men and women and children as she trotted up the path on her husband's arm. "Good old Cookie!" they shouted as she stumbled, laughing and crying, into the open cab, showered over with confetti. And all the way back to the Vicarage these hearty cries rang in her ears, for boys and girls ran on each side of the cab.

Bill met the bride and bridegroom at the gate, with a white ribbon in his collar. Dignity forgotten, he leaped and barked and ran. Cookie, for all her sharp remarks when he dirtied the spotless wet steps, had always been his friend. In his memory was the recollection of many a succulent and strictly forbidden tit-bit. "Good old Cookie!" he cried with the rest of them—"good old Cookie!"

Then followed the breakfast in the marquee, served by two slightly condescending waiters from the Rex-bridge caterers'—were they not in the habit of waiting upon the gentry and even the nobility of the neighbourhood, to say nothing of the gentlemen at the Golf Club on Saturdays and Sundays? (All golfers are gentlemen; it is the Royal and Ancient game.)

The babble of tongues, the clatter of knives and forks, and the popping of corks went on unceasingly until the Vicar rose to his feet. Then there was a cheer and silence.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he said, "charge your glasses for a toast. I am not going to ask you to drink

the health of Mrs. Frederick Jennings, for, by that name, if she lives to a hundred and two, she will never be known to me or to any of her old and affectionate friends. I am going to ask you to drink a toast with which I couple the name of the bridegroom, wishing great happiness and many years of continued cheeriness, generosity, and optimism to that dear woman who will go through life as Cookie." (Loud cheers.) "Cookie!"

"Cookie!—Cookie!"

Archie's clear baritone started it. "Fo-or she's a jolly good fellow . . ."

Every other voice caught up the old familiar song, and a "Hip-hip-hip hurrah" came loudly, with one for luck, from the throats of all the men.

Fred Jennings stood upon his feet, breathing loudly. There was another cheer. But Cookie put out her hand and pulled him down. She rose, and remained standing silently, until the burst of applause subsided.

"Dear Master," she said—"dear Master——"

She got no further. She stood for a moment quite still. Then she sat down, and bent her head over her plate.

But Fred Jennings spoke, and so did Mr. MacFall, Collins, Dick Turner, and Peter Meadows. Mr. MacFall said that in whatever class she entered, no judge, even though he was got at as they mostly are, could fail to give first prize to Cookie. Collins, not to be beaten, said that Cookie would bloom through the winter without any glass, and Dick Turner made a really excellent comparison between Cookie and fine old ale—Cookie's scream of laughter nearly tore the tent—and Peter Meadows remarked with the faintest touch of bitter-

242 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

ness, that no motor, clatterin' and stinkin', would put her off the road.

And in the kitchen, Cookie's kitchen, listening to the cheers and laughter, the new cook sat. She was a girl with golden hair and big blue eyes and a hole in her heart.

CHAPTER V

THE year grew old.

Harvest gathered in, fruit picked, roses fallen, the leaves still clinging turned to red, turned to yellow, and waited for the winds and rain. Swallows, swifts, and martins left their nests and gathered together upon the telegraph wires, ready but unwilling to sail. Owls hooted in the pollards as days closed in, and wasps found warm corners in which to sleep and die.

No longer was the Vicarage garden aflame with colour. Scudding clouds by day and cold sparkling skies by night looked down upon almost empty beds. Here and there an autumn flower glimmered red and yellow.

But in the house fires burned and lamps gleamed early, and the work of the day was as early and as late as ever. Summer and autumn, spring and winter, brought with them new work, new duties, for Harry and his wife.

Harry did not need Mary Anne Lemmins in his house to remind him of one of his new duties. Already he had held long talks with East Brenton mothers on the question of dealing fairly and honourably and fearlessly by their daughters. If he had not been Harry

Pemberton, the man who had earned the confidence and affection of them all, they would have regarded the opening up of such a matter with them as impertinent interference. Their attitude was the general attitude. That they should be asked to discuss calmly with their young daughters anything which has to do, however remotely, with so delicate a question shocked and surprised them. They had not been told by their mothers. Why therefore should their daughters be told? They could not "bring themselves" to do it. They listened wide-eyed to Harry's sympathetic common-sense, but agreed to do nothing more than think it over. When they did think it over, they came to the conclusion that the whole thing was a cranky idea of the Vicar's. "Oh! he's a clergyman," they said to themselves, "and he must do something." And when those who were frightened and impressed, but too self-indulgent to undertake a task which seemed to them full of difficulty, discussed the matter with their husbands, they all met with more or less the same reply. "What! teach my girls what they ought to know nothing about, make 'em bold hussies and fill their heads with ideas? Let me catch you at it!"

And so, although they all knew that the Vicar meant well, they decided to leave well alone, not to break down the conspiracy of silence which they had always been taught was the right thing, and not to interfere with the laws of nature. If their daughters were, unfortunately, of the kind to go wrong, nothing that they could say would prevent it. "What was good enough for my mother and grandmother must be good enough for me. I don't hold," they argued, "with these new-fangled ideas."

Harry persisted. He tried to make these mothers understand that knowledge protected innocence while ignorance made it an accident. Why should their children be taught anything? Why teach at all? If it was right to teach them one thing, it was right to teach them everything. He tried to win the few educated women in the place over to his side. But these people treated him to stiffer backs and more outraged expressions than he met among the working classes. They simply wondered that a clergyman of the Church of England could permit himself to entertain ideas so diametrically opposed to all the teachings of the Church. They dubbed him revolutionary, socialistic, almost French. "I could not be so immodest," they said, with tilted chin, "as to broach such a subject to *my* pure-minded young daughters. Therefore you must not ask me to do so to the daughters of the poor."

Harry found that, like all enthusiastic crusaders, he had gone to work too quickly. He had put his finger on what he took to be, and knew positively to be, as all thinkers for years have taken and known positively to be, a dangerous weakness in the upbringing of the young. He wanted to make an alteration at once. He wanted to apply a remedy before people were aware of a disease. His distress at the almost callous attitude on the part of all the women to whom he spoke was acute. He made a fresh start. If he could not persuade the mothers to protect their daughters, he would not rest until he had imbued the young men with an ambition to protect them. "Treat every girl," he said to them, "as you would have your sister treated. Let no young woman be the worse for knowing you."

It was an uphill struggle. Mothers and fathers, even the so-called educated mothers and fathers, considered his doctrine to be dangerous and abominable, and the young men grinned and winked behind his back. "Fine cricketer, the parson," they said. "Suppose he thinks it his job to talk rot."

But Harry had bared his arms to fight ignorance and false modesty, and nothing should stop him. He would, however, fight with unseen weapons. He gave up discussing the subject, and held classes for young girls in the new room at the club. He called them cooking and household classes, but they were conducted once a week by an enlightened and sympathetic woman from London, who led her pupils very gently into the knowledge of the essential things which their loving and assiduous parents regarded as disgusting and immodest.

So far as Effie was concerned, Harry was happy. *She* was not ignorant, at any rate. Innocent and modest, yes, but not ignorant. Helen had seen to that.

But Helen had *not* seen to that.

Helen was the daughter of an English gentleman, a member of the upper middle class. She had been brought up in a highly respectable street, by an elderly aunt, who was the widow of an Oxford don. It is true that she had spent the greater part of her life among the poor, rubbing shoulders with ignorance, immorality, crime, poverty, starvation, disease, and dirt. It is true that her mind was broad, her sympathies wide, her heart big, her knowledge of the great raw side of life immense. But prejudice and convention remained.

Her love for Harry almost amounted to adoration. She lived for him and for his work. She would willingly

have died for him. He was her hero. All that was romantic in her nature was stirred by his great, strong, virile personality, his renunciation of all ambition for personal aggrandisement to devote himself body and soul to parish work—he, Harry Pemberton, who could so easily have mounted to the top of any of the trees he had chosen to climb.

Not to carry out his wishes, not to obey a request that was made under great emotion, and after deep thought, which concerned the happiness of their daughter, was to her almost a crime. In every other thing, however big or little, he had been obeyed or obliged. And Helen, the prim Helen, the child of a man who hardly ever talked, and never in his life discussed or made confidences, was physically unable to speak, as Harry had begged her to do, and as she had agreed to do, to Effie.

Many times she had braced herself up to do so, but always, at the last moment, heredity and prejudice had made it impossible.

“To-morrow,” she said—“to-morrow. Effie is very young. She runs no risks under this roof. Besides, Effie is—Effie.”

All the same, Helen was not happy. Always in her mind rankled the thought that she was being disloyal to Harry. And yet, fighting this, was the deep-rooted conventional prejudice against going into the details of the relations of the sexes with her daughter who was unmarried.

In the Vicarage Helen represented the mothers of her country—the mothers who are not fit to be mothers.

And what of Effie?

She loved Archie Graham. She knew it, she gloried in it. However dull the day's round, however unexciting and monotonous the life she led, however sunless the sky, her love filled and illumined her life. It was her first love. It might or might not be her only love. Not yet twenty, there was lots of time to grow out of love and love again. But hers was the heart of a young thing—one of the hearts that opens with difficulty, takes in bigly, and retains always. As yet, being only twenty, she was content to love. She did not know the need of having love returned. As yet it was joy enough to see and hear and step out by the side of the one whom she had taken into her heart. As yet, she did not desire, even vaguely and mysteriously, any more than this. She did not know that there could be anything more to desire. There was nothing of the clinging, tearful, namby-pamby about her. She uttered no words of endearment. Her happiness came in being near Archie, in constant, fresh, joyous companionship—golfing, playing tennis, and walking with him.

If she had not kissed him that once Archie Graham would never have guessed her glowing secret. Her wish to be constantly in his company was totally unaffected. Because he loved her, however, and all his senses were alive, he did guess it, and the knowledge acted upon him as a spur. He knew well enough that his vanity was fed by her love. But Harry had awakened all that was best in him—a sense of loyalty, a sense of responsibility, the knowledge that he must work before he could love, an overwhelming desire to play the man. He and she had all their lives before them, thank God! and when the time came he would

claim her. Not until then. For all these reasons, then, he loved and forced himself to forget that he loved. He was like a man who finds gold, marks the place, and continues on his journey.

So far, good.

CHAPTER VI

ONE evening in mid-October, after Harry and Helen, having dined, had gone off to the club, and in the twenty minutes during which Archie permitted himself to loaf before sitting down to his books for the evening, alone in the den, Bill came back from the gate, cold and rather bored—Best-of-All *was* so keen on that blessed club—and found Archie, mashie in hand, standing on the mat in the hall.

Effie, with a lamp at her elbow, was kneeling on the floor, with a new book on golf, full of photographs of a champion in all the intricate attitudes of the game. It was Archie's, and had just come down from London by post.

"What!" cried Bill, "not content with playin' that old gentleman's game all the afternoon, you . . . Great Cæsar's ghost!"

He threw up his eyes and marched into the dining-room, sat down and blinked at the fire.

"The short approach," read Effie. "Now look here, Archie, do you mean to tell me that he is doing anything more than use his wrists for that?"

Archie knelt down too. Their heads nearly touched. One jerk of Archie's elbow and over went the lamp.

"Yes. I say that he's putting a certain amount of right fore-arm into that stroke. Not much, but a certain amount."

"Oh, bunkum!" said Effie.

"Quite Elizabethan," said Archie, with a bow.

"Oh! well, I mean nonsense."

"Mid-Victorian!" said Archie.

"Well then, rot!" she laughed.

"Anno Domini, 1908."

"It's all very fine," said Effie, "but when one's having a very serious argument about a mashie shot one can't talk the language of—of——"

"Of a Slade Professor—possibly not. The Royal and Ancient was invented and played by several hefty old Scots full of ozone and unblended whisky, and none of us have forgotten it. Nevertheless——"

"Oh! do be quiet, and look at this photograph. You *must* own, unless you're absolutely blind, that the mashie is held lightly, and that nothing but wrist is being used."

"The photograph doesn't show how far off the pin is."

"Why should it? It says 'the short approach.'"

"Yes, but every golfer has his own ideas of how many yards a short approach is. If he plays and lies dead at thirty yards, it becomes a good fifty over the fire. But if he plays and punches, and the ball bounces off the green into the rough, it's a deceptive twenty yards—the lie was rotten and a dog barked."

Effie smothered a smile. "I don't believe," she said gravely, "that you quite appreciate the solemnity of the game. You ought to take up marbles."

Mary Anne left the dining-room with the tray.

"Mind the lamp, please, sir," she said.

"Oh, right oh!" sang out the boy. "Ah now, marbles. That's an idea. I'll train."

Effie rose and closed the book, put it on the hall table, and leaned against the wainscoted wall.

"The glass is rising," she said coldly.

Archie handed her the mashie. "Show me the stroke," he said.

Effie smiled and took the club. "There's the pin," she said, pointing to a riding-whip that hung from a peg at the end of the hall.

"I see it. Allow for a cross wind—stiffish."

The girl addressed an imaginary ball on the mat, played, and smashed the lamp globe into smithereens.

"Dead!" said Archie.

"Oh, my!" cried Mary Anne, running forward.

"Ah!" jeered Bill—"ah!"

Effie burst into a peal of laughter. "That's three-pence halfpenny of my allowance."

Archie picked up the lamp. "I'll toss you whether I pay for it or you do."

"Oh! no, thank you. I smashed it."

"Yes, but I knew you would."

There was a double knock on the door.

They all turned.

Bill, who knew that the postman had been, came out and growled.

With his nose flattened against the glass in the hall door stood a small telegraph boy.

Mary Anne opened the door. "Graham," she said.

"Me!" said Archie. "Old Win, I suppose. Proposes to lunch and play a round, or wants me to run up and do another show. Can't possibly. Far too——"

He opened the telegram. His eyebrows met, and he gave a gasp.

"Anything wrong?" asked Effie quickly.

"Father's had an accident. I'm to go up at once."

"Oh!" breathed the girl.

"Oh my!" said Mary Anne.

Archie stood still for a moment, gazing at the thin piece of paper. Then he looked at the clock.

"Seven fifty-seven. I can do it on my bike."

He picked up his hat from the bench, caught Effie's hand, drew her to him, pushed her away, opened the door, and disappeared at a run.

"Archie!" cried Effie.

"Yes!" from the darkness.

"Your coat."

"Will you get it while I get my bike?"

Effie twisted round, rushed into the back hall, caught up an overcoat, and returned to the steps.

"Oh, pore Mr. Archie!" said Mary Anne.

A lantern shone out of the night, and quick steps crunched the gravel. Archie ran up the steps.

"Thanks awf'ly." The boy got into the coat.

"Good-bye!" he said. He ran down the steps.

"Archie, when will you be back?"

There was no answer.

"Archie! . . ."

The gate clicked.

CHAPTER VII

ARCHIE bent over the handle-bars and pedalled with all his strength. Of people and dogs the roads were luckily empty, but of loose stones, broken bottles, and odd bricks they were, as usual, full. No one swept the roads, and no one lit the lamps, and no one knew exactly what became of road and light taxes in East Brenton.

The station lights soon flickered through the leafless branches. Archie rode on to the path through the subway, and jumped off at the steps. Up these he carried the bicycle, propped it up against the wall of the parcels office, took a single ticket to London, heard the train enter the station, and ran full tilt up the steps on to the platform. He flung himself, panting, into an empty carriage.

"Near thing, sir," said the genial station-master with a shake of the head.

Archie made no answer. The train glided out. It was a slow train, stopping not only where it ought to stop, but where it ought not as well. But if it had been a record-breaking train it could not have gone fast enough for Archie.

He had left the telegram at the Vicarage, but its message seemed to be written on the cushions of the

carriage, on its walls, ceiling and floor. "His Lordship has met with an accident. Please come at once.—GEIKIE."

The boy's sensitive imagination ran ahead of the train, and played like lightning about his father's room in Grosvenor Square. An accident! Horrible word. It might mean anything. It might mean a sprained ankle, a broken nose, a dislocated thumb. It might mean a fractured leg, a broken arm, a smashed collar-bone. It might be a timid way of saying—death.

"Get on! Oh, get on, for God's sake, get on!" he cried aloud to the train. "I tell you that my father has met with an accident—an accident!"

All that had been painful and full of irritation in his relations with this fine old man was forgotten. Their mutual misunderstandings, their silences, their recriminations, hitherto frightfully vivid whenever the thought of his father entered his head, took wings. Under the fright and anxiety and horror into which the vague telegram had flung him, Archie could only remember that he loved and admired the gaunt old man who sat alone so often in the cold, silent house, in which the mellow voice of a woman was never heard.

He only knew that one of the deeply-cherished ambitions of his life had been to stand well, at last, in his father's sight, to be able to win from him, at last, a look of confidence and unsuspecting affection, a smile of approval. He knew that he had done very little to merit his suspicion and disapproval. He knew that he had tried very hard to weed out the tricks, the poses, the shiftiness, which had grown upon him like fungi.

He had looked forward, with almost tremulous eagerness, to the time when, under Harry Pemberton's sunny influence, he could at last stand up before his father cleared and confident.

An accident—what did it mean? Had he worked for nothing, had he taken himself by the scruff of the neck for nothing? Was he going up to find that his efforts were too late?

Every time the train pulled up and dallied, or seemed to dally, upon the empty stations, the boy's head was out of window, and between the stations—in the endless distance between the stations—his mind was filled with horrible pictures and dreadful forebodings.

He could see the old man in bed, with his eyes shut, and a feeble, nerveless hand, palm up, upon the blankets. He could see——

Paddington, thank God!

And then a cab and the cold air and the blinding lights and the whirl of traffic and quick movement. "Get on!" he kept shouting. "Quicker!—quicker!"

The sight of the poster of an evening paper, held by an elderly man under a lamp-post, made his blood turn cold. "Serious accident to a Cabinet Minister."

Marble Arch, Park Lane, Brook Street—home.

He stood on the steps of the house he called home for the first time for many years, afraid to ring. A great trembling seized him, and his mouth became dry.

The door opened. A tall, thin, angular, big-boned man passed the servant. A brougham moved up a dozen yards nearer the house.

"Back in two hours," he said, and disappeared.

The man-servant saw Archie, and held the door open. The boy marched in and gave up his hat.

"Geikie?" he asked.

"With his lordship, sir."

The boy was afraid to ask what was the matter. If the doctor was coming back in two hours, at least his father was alive. But——

He went slowly and deliberately upstairs. A hospital nurse scudded down. There was a peculiarly sickly sweet smell everywhere. A good-looking, young-looking, middle-aged man, too smartly dressed, hurried past him. Archie knew that it was Murray Gilchrist, his father's secretary.

He met Geikie outside his father's door. He was mopping his forehead with a red silk handkerchief.

"That be you, Mr. Erchie?" he said.

The boy leaned one hand against the doorpost. "You—said—an accident—in your telegram?"

"Weel!" replied the valet irritably, "and isn't it an accident?"

"What is it?"

"It's in all the papers. His lordship slipped in getting out of the carriage, on the way frae the Hoose o' Lords. Leg broken, bad jar to the systeem, may be on his back for months. Ye can't go in theer!"

The boy pushed the man aside, quietly opened the door of his father's room, tip-toed across it, and stood by the bed.

The gaunt old man was sleeping under a draught. The fracture had been set. In the dim light Archie could hardly see his father's face. His hand was lying feebly on the blanket, palm up.

Archie sat down by the bed and took his father's hand.

* * * * *

258 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

The doctor came, heard the nurse's report, looked with satisfaction at the still-sleeping patient, eyed the boy curiously, and went away.

At two o'clock the next morning the night-nurse touched Archie's arm.

"Won't you go to bed now?" she whispered. "I shall be here all the time."

The boy shook his head. He held his father's hand lightly.

At five o'clock the nurse came round again. "Won't you——"

Again the boy shook his head.

* * * * *

At ten o'clock, the straw in the road without dulling the rumble of wheels, Lord Aberlady opened his eyes. For a moment or two he looked vaguely at the ceiling, at the new nurse, at the hoop over his leg. He moved his hand. It was held tight. He moved his head round and saw Archie.

"Oh, father!"

An infinitely tender smile played round the old man's lips.

"My boy!" he said.

CHAPTER VIII

DURING the next ten days Alexander Geikie, son of the Geikie who had made flies and tackle in Dundee, gave vent to the same remark many times, and always when he left his master's room. He made it aloud, in a confidential whisper, not entirely devoid of honest emotion.

"Weel, it's pairfict. Ma worrd, it's pairfict."

Something of the comedy as well as a good deal of the pathos of this sudden, silent coming together of his master and his master's son went home to this dry, accurate, painstaking Scot. It seemed to him to be a curious thing, that, once recovered from the shock of this accident, he should be glad that it had happened. But he was glad, extremely, sympathetically glad, for, notwithstanding that Lord Aberlady was a prisoner to his bed for the first time within his memory, that he was debarred from taking his part in a keen and fierce political struggle and rendered almost impotent at one of the great moments of his career, he had never seen his master so completely happy and contented.

The wall that had taken years to grow up between this father and son had crumbled and fallen. The old man and the young one had seen suddenly, for the first time,

into each other's hearts, and both had discovered in the heart of the other something which neither had supposed was there.

It moved old Geikie to many unnecessary blowings of the nose to watch these two together, to see the son's eagerness to spend all his hours with the father, and the father's reluctant persuasion to get him out into the air. All day, except for an hour or two for exercise, the boy sat with his father, and in the hour or two that he was away the father eyed the clock and fidgeted and was very cantankerous.

At night the boy slept in the dressing-room with the door open, and many times crept into the room to see that his father was sleeping. If he was not, both were glad, for both realised that much good time had been lost, that there was much good time to make up. And they snatched at the hours from the night greedily.

They made no confessions, no long confidences, indulged in no sentimental orgies of conversation. It was enough for both that the wall was down. Eyes spoke more eloquently than all the combinations of words that either could, or cared to, arrange. The boy's pleasure was derived from being near his father always, the father from having his son constantly in his line of sight.

The boy delighted to be of some use, to act as nurse, to see to medicines, to fetch and carry and to wait upon the old man. The nurse gave orders, and Archie carried them out, and both the nurse and the secretary were obliged to be idle, for the boy insisted on doing their work. He read the papers to his father, he saw to his correspondence, he set his father on to talk about the things that he had done, and listened breathlessly.

He gave the old man humorous descriptions of East Brenton, he painted pictures of the Vicarage, of Harry Pemberton, Helen, Effie, Cookie, Mary Anne, and Bill. He described exciting games of golf, evenings at the club, Cookie's wedding and breakfast in the tent. He discussed his work and the future.

"It's pairfict—ma worrd, it's pairfict," repeated Geikie, again and again.

And Geikie was right, as usual. There was something very perfect in the affectionate intimacy of this stern old man and his sensitive, imaginative son. There was, too, something very touching in the eagerness of both, in the unspoken craving of both, to win forgiveness, in the restraint the boy put upon himself to prevent a torrent of explanation, of reasons, in the struggle of the old man to throw off an habitual reserve.

Lord Aberlady's recovery was good. He was a man who had had no dealings with self-indulgence, a man who regulated his life and lived by time-table, who was his own martinet. Of an iron constitution, he had worked and exercised equally. Moderation in all things was his guiding principle. Therefore, although several years on the wrong side of sixty, the doctor was more than satisfied with his convalescence. But he found in his patient, to his infinite surprise, no anxiety to hurry back to his place in the world. On the contrary, he noticed in him a curious eagerness to remain where he was.

At first, the doctor, who knew Lord Aberlady's conscientious character, who was well aware of his importance to his party at a moment when their fortunes hung in the balance, was shocked to think that the accident had left his patient without a desire to

return to the struggle. He pumped the old politician and got nothing. He pumped Archie, and got nothing. Finally he pumped Geikie, and got the truth.

Lord Aberlady was so happy in his boy's affection that he dreaded to break the spell. That was the truth. He looked upon his return to health as the signal for separation. Not the separation of mind. Thank God, that was a black thing of the past ! But a separation of presence, voice, eyes, touch, companionship.

He hurried slowly. He remained a prisoner because he loved his cell. He persisted in being an invalid. He refused to accept a ticket of leave.

And so, as there is no better way of knowing a man than by camping with him, there was no way half so good to make the friendship of his son as by keeping to his room. He had always loved his boy, and the boy had always loved him ; but neither knew the other until this time of illness—this blessed time of illness.

Many things surprised him in his son—his bubbling humour, his awakening ambition, his shrewd knowledge of character, his keen observation, his love of the country, his simplicity, and, above all, his sensitiveness. He saw in him certain chameleon-like characteristics—a boyish and perfectly frank vanity, and the remnants of a tendency to pose. He recognised in him something of his own dogged determination, more than a suggestion of his own downright method of passing judgment, and utter impatience of clap-trap. And gradually he came to find in the boy many of the little flashes of fun, of unexpected feeling, of fondness for colour, of charm of manner, which had drawn him to the woman he had married, adored, and lost.

And the boy, naturally, found his father very different from the man he had always supposed him to be. There was the sternness, but that was good. He liked that now it was unaccompanied by anything of suspicion. But in place of hardness he discovered sympathy ; not wordy sympathy—sympathy for the most part that got no further than the eyes, but which had the same effect as a glint of sun through a cold, grey sky. He came suddenly upon humour, caustic and rapier-like, upon tenderness, upon a sort of simple humility that in a man who had made a niche for himself in history was peculiarly inspiring, and upon a vein of affection and sentiment that carried all before it.

Providence must have intended that these two should find each other out.

Hours and days lengthened into weeks. The cold old house in Grosvenor Square was made warm by affection. Archie knew it now as home.

At last the doctor insisted upon a change of air and scene, and packed the two—for the one would not go without the other—off to Brighton.

Geikie went down first. He examined the Bedford Hotel cautiously. He “didn’t see the need” for agreeing to pay as much as was asked for the little suite of four rooms on the first floor, seeing that they were wanted by Lord Aberlady, “a name that would look weel in the list of veesitors.”

However, the people of Brighton, who are usually, in December, the people of every other place than Brighton, soon grew accustomed to seeing the tall, old man limping about in the pale sun and keen breezes on the arm of the slight, straight boy, or sitting with him in one of the shelters in quiet and affectionate

conversation. In the hotel Archie was sole secretary, only nurse, boon companion, and he would have constituted himself valet also if Geikie had not struck.

Among the many letters that he wrote for his father Archie put, three times a week, a letter for Harry Pemberton, sending his love to Helen, to Effie, and to Bill.

And still old Geikie made the same remark at all times of the day.

“ It’s pairfict—ma worrd, it’s pairfict.”

CHAPTER IX

ONE humid December morning shortly before Christmas Effie was sitting listlessly in front of the fire in the Vicarage dining-room. She was reading the paper, as she had done everything else since Archie had gone away, without interest. She was filled with a great discontent, a growing and ever-present sense of rebellion against her lot, a feeling of emptiness and loneliness, a tremendous sickness for Archie.

Not until he had gone away did she find out how much she needed him, how little life had to offer when he was not there. Without him the whole world was empty and worthless.

She had done what she had to do well enough. She helped her father and mother as energetically as usual. She ran the house to free her mother for endless outside duties. She played golf with her father whenever he had the time to spare. She called in all her inherited pluck to prevent Harry and Helen from seeing how miserable she felt. Outwardly, when they were by, she was the same Effie who had been the life and spirit of the house before the advent of Archie. Inwardly she was a new Effie, an Effie she herself failed to recognise

or understand. She was not only dissatisfied with life. She was, and became more and more dissatisfied with herself. To her it seemed not only natural but inevitable that she should love Archie. What she resented in herself and hated herself for was the overwhelming feeling of jealousy of Archie's father that took and retained possession of her. At one moment she threw out her arms and cried out for Archie. At the next she called herself every name she could think of for her disgraceful lack of sympathy. She had loved Archie no more before the accident to Lord Aberlady than she loved him now. She could not understand why the love that had been so delightful when Archie was in the house should be so painful now that he was out of it.

At first she was able to shake these feelings off with some success. She assured herself that, after all, he would not be away for more than a week. Surely she might spare him to his father for a week. She greedily undertook all the useful jobs that she could get from Harry and Helen. She invented things to do. She kept herself incessantly busy. She filled up every moment, and refused to permit herself the luxury of unhappiness. But one week spread into two, into three and four and five, and in the short letters from the boy there was no mention of his return.

With the almost unerring intuition of a woman she knew, although Archie had never told her, that he loved her. The thought that he might grow out of loving her never came into her mind. Why, they loved each other! How could either of them prevent it, or stop it, or alter it! She was perfectly satisfied with the fact that, however long he might be away, whether

the weeks developed into years, his love would remain unaltered. She was in that glorious adolescent stage of life before knowledge and experience have arrived hand in hand and flung faith into a shivering heap.

In all her thoughts about this mutual love marriage had never entered. She had never got so far as that. She was content just to go on with Archie from day to day, loving, of course, in constant companionship, of course, but with nothing else. What else was there? Was not that all that there could be?

But as time went on, and all the days were without the boy, there were mysterious moments, vague, curious, groping moments, when it seemed to her that there must be something more. She did not understand them, she could not understand them. She simply cried out, "Archie, Archie, do, *do* come back!"

For Helen had not spoken.

The paper that Effie was listlessly reading was two days old. She read until she came upon the following paragraph: "Lord Aberlady, who has been at Brighton with his son, Mr. Archibald Graham, returned yesterday to London, having made an entirely satisfactory recovery from his recent distressing accident."

It was a halfpenny paper, and so, of course, it could not be expected merely to state facts. Having regretfully done that, it went on to give many absolutely mythical details of the Cabinet Minister's visit to Brighton, with a list of his remarks on current events which he had never spoken. It filled up the remainder of the column with an elaborately-worded "pen picture" of "young Graham." This, from the fact that a mass of curious words were strung meaninglessly

268 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

together, must have been written by the dramatic critic of the paper.

All that Effie read was that Archie's father was well, and that Archie had been free to return to the Vicarage for three whole days.

CHAPTER X

THAT evening, about half-past eleven, Bill, who was lying on the rug in front of Harry's fire, thinking deeply, suddenly pricked his ears.

Harry, just back from the club, was seated at his desk. He was examining Jennings's monthly statement of the workings of the club, item by item.

Helen, Effie, and Mary Anne had gone up to bed. The shutters were barred up over the door. All lights were out below stairs, with the exception of Harry's candles. There was not a sound in or about the house.

Yes, there was a sound. As Bill rose to his feet quickly, Harry heard brisk steps on the path that led round from the front.

"Curious—at this time of night! Now then, Bill," said Harry, "why don't you bark?"

"Bark?" cried Bill—"bark? Do you mean to say you don't know who that is?"

There was a tap at the window.

Greatly surprised, Harry strode across the room, pulled back the red curtains, and threw the window open. There stood Archie, with his coat turned up round his ears.

"My dear chap!" cried Harry.

First one leg and then the other came over the window-ledge, and Archie stood in the room, smiling.

"I'm awfully sorry I'm so late, sir," he said. "I stayed up to see the Gov'nor to bed."

Harry gripped the boy's shoulders with both hands.

"It's Archie, old Archie, come back. My dear fellow, this is good. Never mind about being late. Better late than never. We had all begun to think that you'd deserted us! Off with your coat, and come to the fire. Your nose is gleaming like the sun in a fog."

"Hullo!" cried Bill. "Hullo, old cock! B'Jove! I *am* glad to see you."

"Thanks, most awfully!" said Archie. "Hullo, Bill, old boy! As fit as ever?"

"No," said Bill. "We've been most frightfully slack since you went away."

"Never mind about Bill. Get down, you ruffian! Come and warm your boots and give us the news. I'm delighted to see in the papers that your father is well again."

"Rather!" said Archie.

"By George, he's had a long illness!"

"Not long enough for him or for me," said the boy.

He walked over to the fire, and held one foot towards the blaze. Harry and Bill followed him.

"We're great pals now," he added simply.

"I understood," said Harry.

"You always do understand," said the boy.

Harry brought forward a chair, placed it in front of the fire, and went over to Archie's desk.

"Catch," he said.

"Oh, don't you bother!" said Archie. He caught the pipe.

"Coming over," said Harry. He pitched a tin of smoking-mixture at the boy.

"Oh! look here, sir, I'm keeping you up."

Harry brought his own chair forward, and sat down, beaming. "Keeping me up, of course you're keeping me up. You don't suppose that I'm going to bed without a yarn, do you? This is an epoch-making night. Not one pipe, but a couple, old man, and in all probability, three. Why, it's an age since I've seen you."

The boy threw a grateful glance at the big parson. He bent down and rubbed Bill's right ear.

"Is Mrs. Pemberton well?"

"Splendidly well, thanks; up to her eyelashes in work."

"That's nothing new," said the boy.

"No, but just now she has even more to do than usual. Christmas will be on us before we know where we are, and there is the girls' annual concert to arrange."

"I must lend a hand. And how's Effie?"

Harry's smile became very tender. "As well as ever, bless her!" he replied.

"And Cookie?"

Harry gave forth a bellow of laughter. "I simply couldn't paint you the picture of her happiness," he said. "You must pay her a state visit and see it for yourself. She's the great lady of the place. She sails about the village in rustling dresses and hats that put the French into a little round corner. Oh, such hats! Jennings—good chap, Jennings, he makes a model steward—is visibly increasing his adipose deposit. Cookie gives him Savoy dinners every day of his life.

She's here every morning now, looking after the soup kitchen. The women wouldn't have Mary Anne's soup, so Mrs. Frederick Jennings very politely came to the rescue, and in consequence jugs and basins pour in. I'm afraid we're in for a hard winter."

"How is Mary Anne?"

Harry's face became grave. "Poor little soul! She does admirably well, but I often hear her crying at night. Her heart's in the churchyard."

"Is she—treated well by the village?"

"I saw to that," said Harry grimly.

"And how's Father O'Shaughnessy?"

Again Harry shot out a laugh. "We've just had another quarterly row. This time about an old woman called Sullivan. I gave her a job in the church, mending cushions. It got to the little man's ears, and there was a more than usually dramatic scene in this room on Monday, ending with lunch."

"He is a rum'un," said the boy.

"One of those rum'uns," said Harry softly, "whose place in Heaven has been reserved for him since the day of his birth. Do you know that he lives—or starves—on forty pounds a year, and gives away a hundred and twenty to his poor? I caught him sitting in front of a grate that hadn't known a fire for a month with his head through a hole in a blanket. Some one sent him a ton of coals——"

"Some one!" said Archie.

"And what happened? When no one was looking, he carted 'em off in a wheelbarrow to the old people of his faith, and to one or two of the people of mine. On that one occasion I quarrelled with *him*—a fearful dust-up—and what do you think he did?"

"What?"

"He dug me in the ribs, and said, 'Get along wid ye, Pembherton, me bhoy. It's not a bit uv good quarrellin' wid me, d'y'see. Oi can't give ye a tasty lunch.'"

Even Bill smiled. The little father was one of those sunny, simple God-sent creatures, the mere mention of whose name was enough to bring a smile. It was not because he was small and insignificant, wore curious shabby clothes and boots which, if valued for their age, were works of art. It was not because of his curious bird-like face, his wispy hair, his high-pitched voice, or his strong accent. His appearance mattered nothing five minutes after one met him. No one smiled at him. The smiles were entirely with him. People smiled because just the sight of him made the world seem sunny. He exuded so strong a love of life and of humanity, so overwhelming a faith in God, so extraordinary a belief in the fitness of everything as it was, an optimism so perfect, a sympathy so blessed. His little eyes behind his steel-rimmed glasses twinkled with fun and kindness, and his piping voice had a note in it that vibrated like a bell. Then too, his simplicity, humbleness, unaffected almost childish delight in the beautiful, fierce outbursts, shrieks of laughter, extravagant gesture, sudden silences, commanded admiration, wonder, affection, and amusement. "An oddity," strangers called him. Those who knew him and his work and his influence, his ungrudging efforts at all times of the day and night, knew that he was putting his little shabby feet in the footprints of his Master.

"And so," said Harry, "you and your father are the best of pals."

"Yes," said the boy. "Isn't it too good for words? I can tell you, sir, that I've never in my life been so full of beans. The Gov'nor and I have had a great time. He is a ripper. It was never his fault that he didn't understand me. You see—I—I started off badly. My mother died, you know, when I was born. I only know her portrait, but from that and from what I've pieced together in the last few weeks, I'm not surprised that it nearly killed him, hard—I mean, tough—as he is. . . . He was always on the go, you see, working for all he was worth, and as a yelping kid I naturally got on his nerves. Then came the dame school and bed before he was in, and then the preparatory school for Eton. In the holidays I was shunted off on to young cousins, and he saw nothing of me, and only had to form his conclusions from the Head's reports, and the same thing happened at Eton and Oxford. The old dame couldn't make head or tail of me, and passed me on to the preparatory place with a warning note. The old cock there was not of the same politics as father, and took an instant grudge against me. I was dubbed a little Radical rotter and expected to break out into queer things, and with the reputation he and his masters gave me on I went to Eton. My house was skippered by a monstrous snob, who suspicioned me every day of my life, and cultivated in me the very things he expected me to do. How can you expect a man to come out top when he's labelled rotter? There's nothing to try for. The Gov'nor knew me from their reports, and I'm certain he looked upon me as a budding criminal. I knew that, and, believing that I was a waster—every one told me so—I wasn't able to open out to him as I was always

able to open out to you. . . . I'm making a speech. I'm sorry."

"Go on, my dear chap," said Harry.

"I've only got one other thing to say, and that is thanks most awf'ly for all your kindness to me. I owe my—my friendship with my father entirely to you."

"Don't you think," said Harry, "that Providence has something to do with it?"

"If you say so," replied the boy simply, "yes. But I don't think that Providence took any interest in me until you did."

Harry laughed quietly. "What you say, Archie, would be very flattering to my vanity if I weren't an absolute believer in the workings of Providence for good. All I did was to give you confidence in yourself. Providence—why say Providence when I mean God?—did the rest."

The two men puffed tobacco silently for a moment or two.

Bill had returned to his warm place on the rug. He kept one eye on Archie, and speculated, with pleasure and excitement, on further early morning runs. He knew that it was no use hoping for any notice when those two began to talk. He knew that talking was one of the extraordinary hobbies that two-legged creatures were extremely fond of.

"And now, I take it, you'll live entirely at home in future?" asked Harry.

The boy looked up quickly. "Won't you put up with me any longer, sir?"

"Of course I will, old man, but——"

"There isn't a but so far as I'm concerned, nor father either. I shall go home every week end to be with the

Guv'nor, but he wants me, and I am going to work like a nigger. I want to be a credit to my father, please."

"Good!" said Harry. "We'll see to it. Done any work while you've been away?"

"Not a stroke."

"Right. You'd been cramming blazingly hard. The rest will have done you good. We'll start again to-morrow at nine o'clock."

The boy knocked out his pipe, and rose. "Thanks!" he said.

"Off to roost, old man?"

"Well, I've wasted a lot of your time——"

"Bosh. I'm delighted to see you again."

"Not half so delighted as I am to see you. Good-night, sir!"

CHAPTER XI

THE boy's hand tingled as he left the room. Harry had gripped it very hard.

He sat down at the bottom of the stairs and took off his boots. Then he crept upstairs.

His bedroom was in the front of the house, a large, wainscoted room with a wide view, exactly opposite the one in which Effie slept.

He passed Helen's room on the balls of his feet, and blew a kiss at the door. His mother must have been something like that dear woman, only taller, unless the picture lied. All his life he would remember Harry's wife.

"She was right about those vests," he thought, with a smile. "I don't know I've got 'em on."

He crept along the passage, and up the short flight of wide stairs that led to his landing. His heart beat faster as he went. In that sweet room on the left lay the girl whom he loved, and who would, one of these fine days, when he was a full-fledged barrister climbing up the ladder, be his wife, please God!

"Oh, by Jove, how good to see her again!"

He came to the landing. Suddenly the door on the left opened, and thrown up white, like a young moon, stood Effie. With an inarticulate cry of gladness she

flung her arms round his neck, and their lips met, and again they met, and again.

"Oh, I've missed you so!—I've missed you so! Why have you been so long? How could you stay so long when you love me? You *do* love me?"

"I adore you," the boy whispered. He clasped the warm young body tightly.

"But you haven't thought about me once, not once. You never wrote——"

"I wrote to your father——"

"But why not to me? If you had written I could have borne it better. I could have put your letters under my pillow, and carried them with me all day. Archie!—Archie!"

They kissed again. Her arms wound themselves round his neck. He could feel her heart beating. His heart was pumping. The noise of it seemed to fill the house.

"To-morrow," he whispered, trying suddenly to free himself—"to-morrow."

She clung tighter. "I heard you come. I was lying thinking of you, and I knew your step. What hours you've been with father!"

"To-morrow," repeated the boy feebly.

"Twenty times I came out thinking I heard you coming up. You would have gone to sleep without a word to me?"

"Yes," he said. "This is not the time for seeing you."

"Not the time? Why not?" Her voice was filled with astonishment.

The boy struggled to take her arms away. "It's cold," he said. "You'll catch your death."

She laughed and clung. "Death? With you come back? Why are you pushing me away? Don't push me away!"

"To-morrow," said the boy.

"Now, and to-morrow and all the to-morrows. I'm warm, and very happy—and there's lots to say."

"We shall be heard."

"Why not?"

"Why—not?"

"Yes, why not? Father's had you for hours—it seemed hours. Can't I have anything of you?"

"You—you don't understand. Your father may come up at any moment."

Effie chuckled. "I see! You're ashamed to be seen like this. You're shy! You think father would rag you!"

The boy began to shake. He tried diplomacy.

"What about a round to-morrow morning before breakfast?"

"To-morrow, and all the to-morrows," she said, laying her sweet head on his shoulder.

"Then hurry to bed," he whispered. "It's awfully late. You'll be so tired in the morning."

She gave a long, contented sigh.

"Are you tired, Archie?"

"Doggo!" he said, and he groaned involuntarily.

Instantly he was free.

"Oh! my dear," she whispered, "I'd forgotten! How selfish of me!"

"You're shivering!" he said—"you're shivering!"

"I don't mind. I've got you back again. What time to-morrow?"

"How soon can we see to play? . . . Be quick into

your room ! ” He heard a movement below. A chair thrust back. A step on boards. “ Quick ! ”

“ Eight o’clock.”

“ Then till eight o’clock. Good-night.”

She stood on tip-toe, put her hands on his shoulders, and once more kissed him.

Harry opened his door.

Archie thrust the girl into her room, turned and slipped into his. He stood there, trembling from head to foot.

The stairs creaked.

Archie rushed across the dark room, and stood by the head of the bed.

Harry pushed open the door. Thank God he had no light !

“ Are you awake, old boy ? ”

“ Yes,” said Archie.

“ I forgot to see whether everything was all right here.”

“ Quite all right, thanks ! ”

“ Good-night, old fellow ! ”

“ Good-night, sir ! ”

The stairs creaked again.

Archie locked the door.

CHAPTER XII

FOR the next few days Archie avoided Effie as much as it was possible. He was up as early as usual, but got out of playing those delightful and fiercely contested pre-breakfast nine holes by saying that he must work. There were many weeks to make up.

For several afternoons he was gladly called in to lend a hand in the Christmas decorations of the club, and after dinner, still giving his lost time as a reason, he hurried into the den to his books.

Effie was not content to know that he was in the house, as she had been before the illness of Lord Aberlady. She wanted now to be with him always. She made no attempt to disguise her jealousy of everything and every one that took him away from her.

And never in his life had Archie wanted to be with any one so much as he wanted to be with Effie. Her kisses had set his love ablaze. But he was afraid of her. Her beauty, her swift grace, her vivacity, fascinated him. He thought her more exquisite, more desirable, more worth working for than ever. He ached to be with her, to watch her, and listen to her. But her ignorance frightened him. Her childishness, her utter lack of self-consciousness, frightened him.

She was no longer a slip of a girl. She was a young

warm-blooded, impetuous woman, nearing twenty, in the full flush of youth, who loved him and kissed him and clung to him.

He was not only afraid of her for her sake. He was afraid of himself for her sake also.

She was not a woman who was a child, sweet and cold. She was a child who was a woman, sweet, but almost Southern in temperament.

All that was good and true and sound in the boy was awakened by her simple, unaffected joy in him. All that was natural to his manhood was set blazing by her beauty and the touch of her.

With appalling unconsciousness Effie set these things in him in strong antagonism. The sound in him fought frightfully with the natural.

He resented her ignorance with all his soul. It was unfair, he cried in his heart, horribly unfair, that her utter lack of the simplest knowledge should do its best to ruin a companionship that had been, and ought still to be, exquisite, ideal. It was monstrously unfair that at her age, and with her great beauty, it was possible for her not to know that her kisses were dangerous.

Her deplorable and foolish ignorance not only made her some one to be avoided by him who loved her, but made him hate himself, and hide, and make excuses to keep deliberately out of her way.

He was no stoic, no calculating, cold-blooded person who had himself under the most rigid control. He was a man of intense sympathy, easily set on fire, with a passionate love of all that was beautiful and all that appealed to the imagination.

Once or twice during the first few days after his return he was almost driven to flight. Once he did

start to pack his bag with the intention of slipping out of the house and returning home. But what could he say to Harry and to his father? How could he write to the parson, and say that he found it impossible to remain under his roof with Effie? How could he say that unconsciously she tempted him?

He could not say any of these things. He must stay.

He did stay, but the old charming boy and girl relationship was over. It existed no more. On his part it had become a painful and self-conscious affair. On hers one in which there was jealousy and an underlying, uncomfortable, unsatisfied, mysterious something to which she could give no name.

But, at least, Archie Graham had found himself. He was playing the game like a gentleman, a man of honour. He did not dodge with his conscience, and make shifty excuses. He was all too keenly alive to the position. He told himself that he must never allow himself to be placed in the way of being tempted. He made up his mind to see Effie only at meals and when others were present, to think for her as well as for himself. But with all his soul he resented being forced to adopt such an attitude, and cursed the convention that made such a distasteful and distressing avoidance necessary.

"Why doesn't she know?" he cried—"why doesn't she know? If she did we could go on being friends. She would help me to protect herself. As it is she makes herself almost my enemy. Oh, it's unfair, it's cruel, it's unsound, it's devilish!"

That this marked avoidance on the part of the boy made the poor girl wretched and jealous and uneasy was natural. That it encouraged her desire to be alone with him was also natural. She wanted more than

merely to be with him on the golf-links and stumping across the fields. She wanted to kiss him and be kissed, to cling to him and be held tight. Why shouldn't she? She could see no reason why she shouldn't. She loved him. They loved each other. They belonged to each other. They were born for each other. Life was theirs to divide.

She was more unhappy a thousand times than when he had been with his father. Under these conditions she would far rather he was not in the house. And as the days went by and by, and it became quite plain to her that Archie was inventing every possible excuse not to see her alone, her unhappiness turned to anger.

Then came the evening before Christmas Eve.

Harry and Helen, Effie and Archie, Cookie and Fred Jennings, Father O'Shaughnessy and the Salvation Army man, had all been at work in the club, after eleven o'clock. Their scheme of decoration was on an unambitious scale, but, as it could only be carried out when the club was empty, it was late before it could be finished.

At half-past twelve Harry packed Helen and Effie off to bed, turned Cookie out, and remained with the other men to put the finishing touches.

Pipes were lit and coats removed, and when at last ladders were put away and bits tidied up, there were no brighter, cheerier, and gayer rooms in England than those of East Brenton Club. With his arm round Archie's neck Harry stood in the middle of the billiard-room and beamed round. There was a huge smudge of dust on his big nose.

"Now then," he said, "what complaints?"

"Complaints!" cried Archie.

"If Oi as much as heard the whisper av a complaint," said the little father, who sat cross-legged on the floor, tailor-wise—he had been sewing streamers together—"Oi'd land the man, whoiver he was, wan in the wind, the dhirty villain."

"It might be Buckingham Paliss," said Jennings.

"Do you pass it, Baxter?" asked Harry.

The Salvation Army man wiped his forehead and ran his small eyes critically round the room. "Yuss, sir," he said. "Nem. con."

Bill rose from a warm piece of red baize upon which he had been a lazy but interested spectator. "Quite excellent," said he. "And now," he yawned, "what price bed?"

"Bill!" cried Harry—"Bill!"

"What's up?" asked Bill.

"You're no gentleman."

"I'm too tired to argue," said Bill.

"Imagine a really well-bred dog lolling at ease when he should have escorted the ladies home through the dark."

"You rotter," said Archie.

Bill yawned again. "Anything else?" he asked.

"He's not a dog," said the priest. "He's a lazy, good-for-nuttin', milk-lappin', purrin', flea-huntin' domestic cat."

"Oh, funny!" said Bill, without turning a hair.

Harry tweaked his ear and pulled his tail and gave him a punch.

"No supper for you, my friend. You shan't even smell a biscuit."

"Shame!" said Bill, who knew that he would.

"Chuck monkeying, and come home."

Harry flattened down his hair, turned down his cuffs, put on his coat and overcoat, and loaded his pipe.

"Thanks awfully, you fellows!" he said. "Father, let me give you a lift into your coat."

"Ah now an' I won't, bless ye! Whin Oi'm too feeble to get into ut mesilf Oi'll let ye know, d'y'see."

"Come along then," said Harry, "we'll see you safely home."

"Deloighted!" said the priest.

Jennings was the last to leave the Club. With an air of great importance he shut the door, locked it, tried it, and followed the others to the gate.

"Good-night, gentlemen all," he said.

He watched the wiry, red-headed Salvation Army man mount his bicycle and pedal away, and then listened to the footsteps of the Vicar, the priest, and Archie until they could be heard no longer.

"Freddy!"

Cookie poked her nose out into the cold, crisp air.

"Comin', lovey," said Fred.

Cookie's smile could not be seen by Jennings, but it lit up the cottage sitting-room, upon whose table reposed a steaming dish of beef mince and potatoes and a bottle of ale.

There were no lights in the houses round the green, and although there was no moon, not one of the lamp-posts was alight. The Parish Council thought that there might have been a moon, and left it at that.

The three men stumped arm in arm, the little priest in the middle, across the quiet patch of grass in front of the sleeping Post Office, and came to a halt at the gate of the priest's house, that nestled against his church.

"Good-night, father," said Harry.

"Good-night, sir," said Archie.

"Good-night," said the priest, "and may God bless ye both!"

Harry waited until the little man's door closed. Then he put his arm through Archie's, fell into step with him, and the two marched to the Vicarage briskly.

"Ah!" said Harry, "I can smell the sea in the wind to-night."

"It must be ages since you've seen it," said Archie. "You never take a holiday."

"I've not seen it for . . . By Jove, it's twenty-five years!"

"Good Lord!" said the boy. "But I suppose you *have* had a holiday somewhere or other during that time? You haven't been here without some change of air?"

Harry laughed. "My dear, good chap, I can't afford to take holidays. And if I could, I couldn't get away with any peace of mind. There's too much to do. Helen and Effie have been to Brighton and Bognor and Worthing and Lowestoft and other places of course. I have a yearly quarrel with Helen before she'll go though. I always win, because I tell her that Effie needs the sea. Old Mr. Dunstan—my wife's father—very kindly and quite wordlessly sent her the money for a holiday always until he broke the regular routine of his life by dying. She ought to have come into eight hundred a year then—and oh, wouldn't that have been useful in this village, just! But, as old Mr. Dunstan was far too busy spoiling his books by writing comments on their margins to keep an eye on his solicitor, it was found that although the interest on his money had been paid, the money itself had gone long ago."

"I say!" cried the boy. "I hope you made a dash for that rotten solicitor."

"I interviewed him," said Harry quietly. "But as he proved to me that if old Mr. Dunstan, who really was old by that time, hadn't died when he did, there would have been no more income, I left the wretched man wiping his eyes with an extremely brilliant handkerchief."

"Did he give you no explanation, no excuse?"

"His sort of man has plenty of both, but relies mostly on tears. He had borrowed the money temporarily, intending to pay it back within ten days, but the speculation into which he put it in order to double the money turned out to be what he called a 'vilely dishonest one,' and so for years he had stinted himself to the extent of not keeping a motor or a man-servant, poor fellow! in order to keep up the quarterly payments to old Mr. Dunstan. He was quite angry that the old gentleman lived so long."

"Why couldn't he keep up the payments to Mrs. Pemberton?"

"His business had dwindled away to nothing, and he was on the verge of giving it up to live on his eldest son. He said, 'You can go for me and put me in prison and bring my grey hairs in sorrow to the grave'—he was full of easy quotations—'and, being a Christian, I suppose you will. But if you'd been tempted as I was, you'd have done what I did.'"

"What did you say to that?"

"What could I say, old man? I couldn't disagree. No man can tell what he will not do until he is tempted."

Archie made no reply. He sent up a sort of appeal silently to the impenetrable vault above him and

set his teeth. They went into the garden of the Vicarage.

A keen north-east wind was singing through the leafless branches, and it was extremely cold. But Harry turned on the steps and looked out across the meadow affectionately, as he did always, winter and summer, spring and autumn. Whether the tall line of trees away in front were big with leaf or all their naked arms and fingers were silhouetted against a cold sky, the outlook possessed a beauty and a peacefulness peculiar to it.

"It's a good world," he said—"a very good old world."

He opened the door softly. "One pipe, old man?" he asked, under his breath. "No, perhaps not. You must get your beauty sleep. I can't break myself of the habit of believing that you and I are the same age. Pack off!"

"Good-night!" said Archie.

"Good-night, old son! Thanks so much for lending a hand!"

"Good-night, cockie!" said Bill.

The lamp was turned out, and Archie heard Harry Pemberton tread softly along the passage to his room, followed by the pattering feet of William.

He then crept softly upstairs, hoping with all his soul that Effie was asleep. He heard nothing. No light came through the chink between her door and the floor.

With the greatest care he opened his door, entered the dark room quickly, shut the door, and locked it. He gave a sigh of relief and resentfulness. He almost wished that he and Effie had never met and loved each

other. At any rate, he regretted bitterly that she had kissed him.

One of his windows was open. He stood for a moment and listened to the silence of the night. "Yes, it is a good world," he thought—"a very good old world. What a pity that it's made so difficult for the young things in it!"

He lit his candles, took off his coat, and hung it over the back of a chair. Then he went towards the bed and drew up with a gasp of dismay and delight.

Curled up under the eiderdown, wrapped in a dressing-gown, with her small, sweet face nestling deep into his pillow, lay Effie, fast asleep. There were tears on her eyelashes, and a soaked handkerchief twisted into a ball in her hand.

He started forward, put his hand on the girl's shoulder, and shook her.

"Wake up!" he whispered hoarsely—"wake up!"

Effie's eyes opened and filled with joy:

"Archie!" she said, holding out her arms.

The boy fell back. His face was white with fright.

"How dare you!—how dare you!" he said.

Effie sat up and looked at him with raised eyebrows. "How dare I what?" she asked. "I meant to speak to you to-night, whatever happened, however late you were. You lock your door when you come to bed, so I waited here. You've got to listen to me now!"

"I'll not listen to a word! Go to your room at once, do you hear?"

The boy spoke sharply, dictatorially, and waved his arm towards the door with a gesture that was almost foreign.

Effie sat up and gave an angry laugh, "I'll go to my room when I'm ready," she said, "and not a moment before."

Archie turned and marched to the door. He unlocked it, opened it violently, and left the room.

In an instant Effie was out of bed. She ran to the landing, down the first flight of stairs, and flung her arms round Archie.

"You shall speak to me to-night, you shall!" she said.

"If you've got anything to say to-night, come down with me to your father's room and say it before him."

"I won't!" cried Effie. "What's the good of that? I can see you before people any time, and that's what I'm so sick of. I want to speak to you alone, and I will."

He wrenched her arms away, and flung them off. "Don't do that again!" he said. "I can't stand it!"

They stood facing each other angrily, breathing hard. Suddenly Effie sat down on the stairs and burst into a passion of weeping. Great sobs shook her and almost choked her. She put her arms over her eyes and rocked to and fro.

"O God!" cried the boy.

He stooped down, picked her up in his arms with a supreme effort, and carried her into her room. He put her down tenderly into an armchair, snatched a blanket from the bed, wrapped it over her, shut her window, closed the door gently, and knelt at her feet.

"Darling!—darling!" he whispered—"darling!"

"It's no use," she sobbed. "It's too late!—it's too late!"

"How do you mean—too late?"

"You don't love me. You hate me."

"I don't love you? . . . Oh, my God, you don't know what you're saying."

"I do know. I know that you loathe me. I sicken you. You slip away whenever you see me coming. I can't even take your arm without making you shudder. Do you think I can't see? Do you think I go about as blind as a bat? What's the matter with me? What have I done to you?"

The boy got up. Effie clutched his hand and held it tight.

"Tell me!" she cried—"tell me!—I must know! —I must! It's—it's simply killing me. Can't you see that it's killing me?"

"Oh, my dear!" he said, putting his other hand on her head.

The touch of him melted her. The vehemence left her voice. She put his hand to her lips, and crooned softly like a mother with her child.

"Oh, Archie, my Archie, I love you!—I love you! I love you more than life, more than my father and mother, more than I know. And you love me, you do love me, you'll always love me. You can't help it any more than I can. I know that. I am happy about that. That's most awfully good. But what hurts me more than I can bear is your keeping away for your work. I want you to work. I want you to do big things. But I don't want you to love work more than you love me. I'm—oh! I'm too frightfully jealous of everything that keeps you away from me! I must have something of you. I must feel your arms round me sometimes to keep me alive. I can't do any more with just going out with you. I want to put my

head on your shoulder, and feel your heart beating against mine. If you told me you had been keeping out of my way because you don't love me any more I should laugh. It isn't possible for you not to love me. You're doing it for some other reason, and I'm going to know it now. You've got to tell me now, or I——"

"Sssh!" whispered the boy. "For God's sake don't even breathe!"

He had heard some one moving in the sleeping house.

With chattering teeth he tip-toed to the door, opened it, and stood on the landing face to face with Harry Pemberton.

CHAPTER XIII

IT was too dark for the boy to see the expression on the Vicar's face. From the sound of his voice, which was thick with anger, he could imagine the expression all too vividly.

"Come with me," Harry said.

As they passed the old grandfather clock in the hall it struck two.

Once in his room, Harry relit the still-warm candles. And then Archie saw his face. It was not the genial, cheery, sunny face of Harry Pemberton. It was the face of a man all of whose blood was surging with rage and indignation, who was fighting hard to remain master of himself. His lips were set tight. His nostrils were distended. His eyes were screwed up. His breath came in great gusts.

"Shut the door!"

The boy did so.

"Come here!"

The boy did as he was bid. He went quietly up to the rug, and stood looking into Harry's eyes fearlessly, simply.

"What were you doing in my daughter's room?"

"Saying Good-night," said Archie.

"You said Good-night at the club."

" I thought I would like to say Good-night again."

" Are you in the habit of making free of my daughter's room ? "

" No, sir."

" Tell me the truth ! "

" I am telling you the truth."

" You say that it's the first time you have been in her room when she has been in bed ? "

The boy hesitated. " Yes."

" I don't believe you ! " cried Harry—" I don't believe you ! You lied to me once. How can I rely on your speaking the truth now ? "

The boy stood his ground, though his face turned white with pain.

" I give you my word of honour," he said.

" Honour ! " cried Harry—" honour ! What sort of honour is yours that allows you to live in the house of a man whose implicit trust you have won, and sneak into his daughter's bedroom at night ? "

" You have a right to say that. I ought not to have gone into your daughter's bedroom. But we love each other, and——"

" And what ? "

" And we like saying a few words alone. It's all my fault, and I'm sorry. But you've no right to doubt my word when I say that all we did was to say Good-night."

Harry seized the boy by the shoulders, and looked into his eyes angrily and beseechingly.

" I don't want to doubt your word. I'd give a year of my life to believe you. But you lied to me once."

The boy flung himself free. " Once !—once ! I told you why I lied to you then. I told you because

you made me think that you'd never suspect me as all the others have. But you do suspect me. Even *you!* "

Harry's eyes could see the cabin of the *Albert Edward*, the golden hair and the big blue eyes of the little girl who lay upon the bunk. He had no eyes for the despair that had suddenly stamped itself upon the face of the boy, no care for the pathetic misery in his voice.

" Yes, yes, I do suspect you!—I must suspect you! I caught you creeping out of Effie's room at two o'clock in the morning. Is that a time when Good-night is usually said? Tell me the truth, you sneak! "

" I have told you the truth, but only half of it. Now you shall have it all. You deserve it. You may call me a liar if you like. What does it matter? No one will see me in East Brenton again, after to-night, as long as I live."

The boy choked, and stood for a moment unable to speak.

Harry's anger still blazed, but it was mixed with a growing fear. " Go on! " he said.

" The first time I went into her bedroom was the night I came back from London."

" Before or after I came up to your room? "

" Before."

" That's a lie! I followed you up after five minutes.

" I say that it was before. Effie met me on the landing outside her room. We were there for three minutes. I forced her into her room when I heard you and rushed into mine. I was not in bed when you came in."

" Why didn't you say so? "

" Because I wanted to protect Effie. To-night, the

second time we've met late, I found her waiting for me in my room, lying on my bed."

"You ask me to believe that?"

"I ask you to believe nothing; I don't care now what you choose to believe. I'm just telling you the truth, to show you what I might have done because no one has seen fit to tell Effie that she is a woman."

"You prove yourself to be lying and trying to shield yourself behind Effie by saying that. Effie *has* been told that she is a woman, and what it means."

"No, no!" cried the boy. "That's impossible. You may think that she's been told, but she hasn't. Good God! do you know what you imply by saying that she has been told? . . . I can't say it. I can't even think of it."

"Say it!" cried Harry—"say it!"

"You imply that Effie was not ignorant, but was tempting me."

With all his self-control out of hand, Harry sprang upon the boy and shook him as a dog shakes a rat, and flung him away, as though afraid of what he might do to him if he had his hands upon him any longer.

Archie staggered backwards across the carpetless room, and was only prevented from crashing into the window by a large armchair. Into this he fell. He did not stay in it an instant. He was on his feet again, pointing a shaking finger at the Vicar.

"Blame yourself for this. Blame your wife. Effie never knew what she was doing. She knows nothing. If I hadn't adored her, and hadn't been trying for all I was worth to play the game for my father's sake and for your sake, she wouldn't have left my bed to-night. I would have locked my door with her in

the room. I wanted to—oh, my God, how I wanted to!—and she wanted to stay, although she didn't know why. If she had stayed, we should not have been to blame. *You* would, you and your wife. If you choose not to believe me, then you accuse your daughter of throwing herself in my way. That's unthinkable. You must believe me!—you shall believe me! I swear by all I hold sacred that it's the truth!"

Archie Graham turned on his heel, opened the window, jumped into the garden, and walked away.

Before his steps had ceased to crunch the gravel the door opened, and Helen stood in the room, with a scared face.

She did not notice that the window was open, nor could she hear the boy's footsteps. All that she could see was the man she loved and admired and worked for, and was willing at any moment to die for, standing in a state of awful agitation.

She ran forward with a cry and caught up his hand.

Harry Pemberton shook her off. "Don't!" he said.

CHAPTER XIV

THE candles on the desk guttered and their flames moved unsteadily. The cold wind blew into the room through the open window.

Bill was trembling on his cushion. It was not the sudden chill draught that made him tremble. He began to tremble at the sound of Harry's voice. He had never heard such a sound in the voice of Best-of-All—never.

Harry was sitting at his desk with a straight back. His eyes were fixed upon the wall at the end of the room. His chest rose and fell like the chest of a man who had been running at top speed.

Helen, shivering in her dressing-gown, stood cowering in the shadow, watching Harry's white, expressionless face.

Five minutes became ten and fifteen and twenty. Nothing was said. Only the wind sighing through the leafless branches broke the silence of the night.

Once Bill jumped down from his cushion and came to Harry's side and stood looking up into his face appealingly. For the first time in his life no caressing, affectionate hand found its way to his ears. Bill waited and waited and looked, and then went over and stood

for a moment near Helen. But her eyes never left that set face, and her hands remained clasped together fearfully.

And so Bill returned to his cushion, sighed, turned round and round, and lay down. But not to sleep.

Finally, without looking at his wife, Harry spoke. "You said that you would speak to Effie," he said. "You promised me that you would speak to Effie. You did not do so."

Helen moved forward quickly. She was almost glad that her failure had been discovered. It had been eating into her mind.

"No, I didn't, I couldn't. I have tried to——"

"There is no excuse," said Harry coldly.

"There *is* an excuse," she pleaded.

"There is no excuse," he repeated. "I gave you the reason for my asking you to undertake what was an unfulfilled duty. You agreed that it was an unfulfilled duty. You prevented me from carrying it out by promising to do so. You did not do so. There is no excuse."

"I won't make an excuse, Harry—I won't make an excuse. But can you make no allowance for me?"

"None whatever," he said; "you promised."

Her voice trembled. She stretched out her hands. "You didn't say when I was to tell her, and I didn't say how soon I would."

He brought his clenched fist down upon his desk. A box of paper-clips jumped, fell on the other side, opened, and the small steel things scattered broadcast.

"You're quibbling," he said. "It was understood that you would speak to Effie at once."

"I will speak to her to-morrow," she pleaded.

"It may be too late."

"Too late? What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say. It may be too late."

"Harry!—Harry!"

Harry's hand opened and shut. His breathing came loudly. "To-night, just now, I found Archie Graham coming away from Effie's room."

Helen uttered a cry.

"Yes," said Harry, "we both can see that little grave. He says that when he came back from his father, Effie came out to him from her room. He says that when he went up to his room to-night he found her asleep upon his bed. He says that he didn't let her stay. He lied to me once. What am I to believe? . . . I heard voices when I left this room. I went upstairs suspecting nothing, only wondering what was the matter. I met him leaving her room. . . . The man who caused that little grave blamed Mary Anne's ignorance. Archie Graham blamed Effie's ignorance. He blames me and you. . . . I blame you. You promised to speak to Effie. You have not done so."

"What are we to do?" cried Helen.

"Either make another little grave or harbour under our roof a dishonoured daughter."

Helen's cry rang through the room. "Have you no mercy?"

"None!" said Harry.

She flung herself on her knees at his side, and caught up his hand again.

Again he shook her off. "Don't!" he said again.

And again there was nothing to break the silence of the night for the moment but the sighing of the wind through the leafless branches.

Two of the candles had burned low, had flickered, made a vain struggle, and gone out. The others burned low in their sockets. Bill was trembling upon his cushion.

"Get up, and go to your room. There is nothing to be done. You are one of the women who is not fit to be the mother of a girl."

He rose, went to the door, opened it, held it open until his wife got on her feet, swayed, and stumbled blindly out. Then he shut the door and put his hands over his eyes.

CHAPTER XV

WITHOUT moving, Harry Pemberton remained in his room for an hour. With his hands over his eyes, as though to prevent himself from seeing for at least a short time any of the things that, it seemed, were bound to happen, there he stood alone.

First one and then the other of the two remaining candles died. The fire had long ago burnt itself out. The room was very cold.

Harry, whose brain had been a blank, who had refused to permit himself to think until he had mastered his emotion, heard with surprise the grandfather clock strike three. If he had been asked, he would have said that he had been alone for five minutes.

A shiver ran over him. He shut the window, and then felt his way to his desk. As he sat down to it, in the chair in which so much of his work was done, the machinery of his brain started again, mechanically.

"And this," he said to himself, "this, until a few hours ago, was the happiest house in England—this, in which the man has quarrelled with his wife and will never forgive her, in which his girl, the apple of his eye, has lost her self-respect and her happiness ; from which the boy they all loved has gone, cursed and cursing !"

He deliberately went over the events of the night again. That boy coming out of his daughter's room. His shifting of the blame upon Helen and himself. His cry that it was unthinkable to suppose that Effie was anything but ignorant. He had been right, Helen had failed. . . . If he had been right in that, if that had been the truth, might he not be telling the truth as to the rest? He had confessed to a lie once. His whole training had encouraged the telling of lies, had taught very little else but cunning, ingenious excuses, subterfuge. No. He was not to be believed as to the rest. . . . He had been trying to break himself of these things, but they had been sown in him early in his life, and would spring up like weeds. . . . And yet he had sworn by all he held sacred, with the ring of truth in his voice, that these visits had been innocent. If only he had not lied before. . . . To believe that this boy was lying was to believe that Effie's ignorance had been taken advantage of.

Harry brought his arguments, his doubts, his questionings, down to this frightful point: "Do I or do I not believe that Effie's ignorance has been taken advantage of?" He reasoned the thing out. He tried to reason it out as though the case was a hypothetical one, or, at any rate, as though it were one that did not concern him more nearly than the cases of all poor, struggling humanity concerned him—not, for the time, as though it affected his own beautiful Effie, the girl who was his pal as well as his daughter, the child who was the symbol of his twenty years of unclouded married happiness, now brought to a sudden and appalling end. He felt that if he used Effie's name in his groping search for a reasonable conclusion his reason would split and crack.

So he took a boy and a girl. A more than ordinary good-looking, charming, and sensitive boy. A boy with an irresistible personality, a most winning manner, an extraordinary aptitude for taking the colour of his surroundings, without side, expert in games of skill, around whom there had been an indescribable air of romance, who awoke instant sympathy from the fact that he was, at first, both motherless and homeless.

And he took a girl, beautiful of face and form, exquisitely unaffected and simple, clean-minded, fresh, and sweet—an English country girl of the best sort, who had never met any men but working men and small tradespeople and clerks.

He threw these two suddenly together. He put them in constant, unwatched companionship daily. Of course such a girl would give her warm young heart to such a boy. He would have come upon her with surprise and delight at a time of her life when she was only waiting to find some one to whom to give her heart. Motherless, and not trusted by his father, having suffered all his life from suspicion, what more natural than for all this girl's dormant maternal instinct to spring into life, for her to take this boy under her wing, to pour out upon him her trust, to immerse him in her first sweet love and confidence.

Such a boy, hungry for love, eager for trust and confidence and sympathy, would gladly seize upon such a love, would fall under the spell of such beauty of face and form, such simplicity of mind, such energy and vitality.

But he gave the boy good instincts. He credited him with an inherited sense of honour, however choked back and stunted it might have been. He agreed that

306 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

he was doing his best to live down, to uproot, all the rottenness of his training. He made him keenly alive to sound influence, but left him human.

Then he took this boy abruptly out of this girl's life. He left her without him for many weeks. He saw her bereft of the man who was the only thing worth living for. He knew that into her empty days hope came to sustain her. If there is no hope in the hearts of the young there is no hope anywhere. But he could also understand the longing, the impatience, the jealousy, the gradual elevation of this unexpected separation into something amounting in the young mind to a disaster, a tragedy.

And then he brought this boy back to this girl—back late at night, as unexpectedly as his going away had been unexpected, and he let the girl hear the boy on his way to his room. Being ignorant, and therefore utterly unconscious of the cruelty it is to the man who loves her, for the girl to go into his arms dressed only for her bed, he placed the girl in the arms of this boy . . . and sprang suddenly to his feet.

"Oh, my God!" he cried, "don't let me arrogantly pass judgment and condemn this boy and girl. You have made them as they are, and we have kept them ignorant. Whether the boy lied or not he is not to be condemned. We are. Helen is. She said that she would speak and she failed. If that boy lied, it is for Effie to forgive her mother, Effie and the boy. If he told the truth, and after the struggle he has made to root out shiftiness I refused to believe him—I, who had inspired him by trust and confidence . . ."

Harry remained standing for a moment, with a great sense of fear upon him.

“What did that boy mean to do when he left this room?”

He rushed to the door, seized his hat, pulled back the bolts of the garden door, threw it open, and ran out into the night.

CHAPTER XVI

“WHICH way ? ”

Harry Pemberton drew up on the corner of the green. It was dark and cold. Not a sound broke the stillness.

He knew the boy. He had wondered many times at his extraordinary sensitiveness. He knew how nervous and high-wrought he was. He had heard, without permitting himself to be influenced by, the ring of utter despair that had been in his voice an hour before.

“ Which way, then, quickly ! ”

He ran to the station at the top of his speed, hoping, but not believing, that Archie might be going back to his father. He found two or three tired night-porters looking after goods trains. One clanked and jarred through as he drew up on one of the half-lighted platforms.

“ Have you seen Mr. Graham ? ” he asked—“ any time during the last hour ? ”

The porter looked at the Vicar in amazement.

“ Speak, man ! ”

“ Mr. Graham, sir ? No, sir.”

Harry strode along the platform to the waiting-room. It was in darkness. He bent down and ran his hand

along first the long wooden bench that ran up one side of it and then down the other. No one.

He left the station, cursing himself for having wasted time. He knew that Archie had not intended to go to the station, and he knew that he had been afraid to look for him—anywhere else.

Back through the sleeping village he went. Back to the Vicarage, still afraid to go where he feared the boy had gone, upstairs to Archie's room.

With a shaking hand he struck a match and lit a candle. No one. The bed had not been slept in, but—the eiderdown was flung back and there was a dent in the pillow! The boy had sworn that he had found Effie sleeping on his bed!

Something lay on the floor by the head of the bed. Harry pounced upon it. It was Effie's slipper.

This was not a lie then! He had spoken the truth in this. Why not as to the rest?

With greater fear than ever Harry was down the stairs and out again into the blackness. This time he did not hesitate. Clenching his fists and breathing hard he ran across the green, turned to the left on the road, raced along and along until he came to the mill and the mill bridge across the swollen, gurgling race of water, saw something dark on the wall of the bridge, saw it leap into the water, heard a splash, scrambled up upon the wall, dived head first into the foaming stream, swam several strong strokes, and made a clutch at a dark head, closed his hand with a grip of iron through its hair, and swam, holding his arm stiffly in front of him, down the stream towards the shallower water and the ford.

"Let me go!" shouted Archie.

Harry swam on triumphantly, thankfully, pushing the boy in front of him.

"Damn you! let me go! I won't live now, what's the good?"

On went Harry, strongly, gladly, silently, gratefully. The narrow water reached, he struggled to his knees, to his feet, flung his arm round the fighting, shouting boy, and carried him to the bank.

Putting the boy on his feet, he held him tight against his chest.

"Let me go!" cried Archie. "You don't believe in me! *You!* I can't live over that."

Harry held the struggling boy with all his strength. "I do believe in you, old man—I do. I believe every word that you said. You behaved like a gentleman and a man of honour, and I thank you. Forgive me."

The boy peered up into Harry's face, gave a great sob, put his head down on the broad, heaving chest, and burst out crying.

CHAPTER XVII

"COME back," said Harry. "We are wet to the skin, and the wind is bitter. Let's run to get warm."

The boy rubbed his wet sleeve over his eyes. "I'm—I'm frightfully sorry I—did this," he said.

"I deserved it," said Harry. "Run!"

They ran side by side. Instinctively both ran fast. They both wanted to leave behind them not the place so much as the cause of their being in the place.

As they ran their boots oozed out water. As their blood began to circulate their teeth ceased to chatter.

Not another word was spoken.

They drew up at the Vicarage gate, stumped round the old, warm house to the garden-door, which was still open as Harry had left it, and went into the silent house.

"When you've rubbed down and got into dry things, come to my dressing-room. I've something to say to you," said Harry.

They separated in the passage. The boy went quietly up the front staircase to his bedroom. Harry made for his dressing-room. He drew off his clinging clothes, rubbed himself into a heat with a rough towel, and dressed.

Then he went down upon his knees, put his arms upon the seat of a chair and his head upon his arms.

"Master," he said, "this is the second time that You've shown me Your infinite mercy when I had none in my heart. I tried to thank You before by giving my life to Your struggling, hard-pushed children. Give me time to try again. I have more to thank You for than ever. I might have killed that boy! You saved him and kept murder out of my soul. Master, what am I to say? . . . And there is Effie—You saved her too, my little Effie, my girl . . . I will do my best to earn Your goodness, Master, and go to Helen in the spirit in which You took my steps this morning. You were merciful to me, I will be more than merciful to her. You made me suffer all these things to see if I had learned Your lesson. You found me wanting. I had no mercy in my soul. Give me strength to do as well as that boy has done, for Jesus Christ's sake."

The boy entered the room, and was about to leave it again, but Harry rose and barred the way.

"Can't you forgive me, old man?" he asked.

The boy's hands fluttered nervously, painfully. "Oh, please don't!" he said.

"I did you a great injustice. I am as bad as the others with whom you've been. You are a better man than I am, Archie Graham. I will take a lesson from you. It is our fault, not Effie's and not yours, that you were put to the test. You've won. Please forgive me!"

Archie thrust out his hands with a broken cry.

"Thanks, old fellow!" said Harry.

"You're—you're so splendid!" said the boy.

"Yes, that's why I became a parson. . . . I'm

going to make a confession to you that I've made to no other living man or woman. You wring it out of me by what you've done for me and for my wife and for Effie. I hoped never to have to make it, but you have humiliated me, and I can pay you back in no other way than by giving you this tribute. . . . Do you remember my saying, months ago, when you asked me why I went into the Church, that I hoped I should never have to tell you ? ”

“ Yes,” said the boy. “ But please don't tell me now ! ”

“ I must, because I want you to know how sorry I am for judging and disbelieving you, and because I want to remind myself of the other time when God drew me up and showed me that if a man is without the quality of mercy he is not fit to be the son of his father.”

He turned his back upon the boy, and looked out of window. Across the sky a thin line of faint light had come. A new day was breaking softly and gently—a day that might have found a tragedy in that quiet, striving house.

Harry began to speak in a low, steady voice. “ I was so splendid a fellow at Oxford,” he said, “ with my cricket blue, my Presidency of the Union, my popularity, my admiring set, my career gleaming ahead, that I did not believe in God, I believed only in myself. I was so splendid that I passed judgments on my fellows, and had no mercy for weakness and broken words. I was not weak. I never broke my word. . . . I had a friend, a Jonathan, whom I loved and trusted. We were together at Harrow, in the same college at Oxford. We rose together, step by

step, in work, and out of it. There was one other person, beside myself, in whom I believed. It was my friend. We were both poor men, soldiers' sons. Our fathers had deprived themselves of their few luxuries to send us to Oxford. They were men who looked to us to do well, but, above all, to keep their names bright. We were both to be barristers. We had both done more than average well in the schools. It was the custom of our fathers to pay into our bank all the money it was necessary for us to have for the year. In the Michaelmas term of our third year my friend came to me and told me that his father was in temporary need for money. Would I lend him, to pass on to his father, all the money I had in the bank which was to keep me at Oxford for the year. It would be returned in a fortnight. I believed in this man, and, without a moment's hesitation, lent him the money. The fortnight came to an end. The money was not returned. I let another fortnight go by, and needed money. I was forced to remind my friend of his guarantee. He confessed, brokenly and with shame, that his father had neither needed the money nor had the money. The story was a lie. He himself had needed the money to pay racing-debts, thinking that he could get the money from an uncle to repay me. The uncle had been, it appeared, bled before. He had no more money to spare. . . . I knew that my father had no money for me. I saw all my chances ruined, all that I had worked for gone for nothing. My friend asked for mercy. I had none. The one way of my remaining at Oxford, my forlorn hope, was to tell my friend's father of his son's treachery, and leave him to make it good. He lived in Scotland. I got permission

from the authorities to go to Scotland on urgent business. I left my friend, well knowing that the germ of suicide was in his brain, and started. . . . Between London and Rugby there was a frightful accident. Three men in my carriage were killed. I lay for an hour unhurt, pinned down with wreckage. . . . In that long, waiting hour God came to me, and when I was free led me to a telegraph office on an errand of mercy. I wired to my friend, 'Your father shall know nothing. Am coming back.' . . . My mother and sisters sold their jewels, and I became a servant of God."

CHAPTER XVIII

EIGHT o'clock struck.

Helen, fully dressed, was lying face downwards upon her bed. No sleep had given temporary pause to her pain and anguish, remorse and grief. She had groped her way to her room, had fallen upon her bed, and lain there as though struck by lightning.

Harry had shuddered at her touch—Harry whom she had served and worshipped and tended, and for whom she would have died if, by dying, she could have spared him a moment's pain.

It was a terrible punishment for not having kept her word, for having failed to speak to Effie. She did not, for one moment, cry out that the punishment was unjust, undeserved. Harry had said that she was a woman who was not fit to be the mother of a girl. It was true. It had been proved. To save herself from an uncomfortable, distressing conversation she had sacrificed her daughter.

But this, Effie's trouble, did not seem to her, awful as it was, so unspeakably awful as the withdrawal of Harry's love and confidence and respect. That meant the end of everything. She hoped that she might die where she lay. She prayed that she might slip out of life before the cold, bleak morning came. Without

Harry's love it seemed to her impossible that she could live.

The only satisfaction that she had in looking back over the years that she and Harry had passed together was that she had until the moment that she hurried down to his room a few hours before never given him cause to be angry with her. This had been their first quarrel. This had been the only time that he had ever looked at her coldly or spoken to her harshly. She had made him happy for twenty years.

In her peculiar humble way she anticipated no forgiveness. Since the day that he had spoken to the village women in the vestry of the church, and later to her in their bedroom, Harry had returned again and again to his detestation of the ostrich system of bringing up girls that was the accepted system. His hatred for the conspiracy that prevailed in all classes to keep girls ignorant had grown every day. She knew that whatever people might think and say, however strongly they looked upon his point of view as indecent and immodest, he had persisted, and intended to persist, in making it accepted in East Brenton. After his first eager and enthusiastic crusade she had watched him go silently to work. He had confided to her again and again that he would be satisfied if even two or three women in the place woke up to the danger of ignorance in his lifetime. He was content to regard his teaching as a seed cast into Time.

Having herself recovered from the shock her inherited and innate prejudice had received, she had acknowledged that Harry's ideas were right. She had not broken faith with him because she was like most of the other women in the village. She simply

318 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

had not been blessed with sufficient moral courage to discuss the question of relationship of sex with sex with her own daughter.

She had hedged with her conscience. She did not possess sufficient imagination to see her daughter in much the same position as Mary Anne and other poor girls had been placed. She had more or less quieted her conscience by assuring herself that Effie was different from most other girls—certainly village girls, who were subjected to temptation. She was Harry's daughter. Wasn't that enough to give her the ability to protect herself? She lived in an atmosphere of refinement and self-control, high endeavour and the worship of God. She never remembered that Archie was a man. He seemed to her to be a boy, as Effie seemed to be a child.

But in these dreadful silent hours she did not snatch at any egotistical comfort, or hug herself in the self-satisfied way that is peculiar to the martyr. She did not cry out that she had done her best to speak. She faced the stern fact that she had promised to speak and had not spoken. She saw, in her characteristic accurate way, no injustice in Harry's anger, and no reason why she should be forgiven.

Once during this frightful hour a wave of anger seized her. "If I am obliged to live," she cried, "I hope I may never set eyes on that boy again—never, never!"

She heard Harry leave the house. As he left it all her thoughts turned from herself to him. "Why has he gone out at this time in the morning?" she asked herself anxiously, and in her characteristic way she prayed that he had put on a warm overcoat. She

heard him return. No hope that he would come into her room warmed her. She was only thankful that he had not stayed out in the cold, raw air. She heard him go out again, and her anxiety returned. All the maternal instinct that is always alive in the heart of a woman for the man she loves was stirred. December mornings were very dangerous unless guarded against. Presently she heard her husband come back again with Archie, and it comforted her to hear the rumble of their voices. And then her thoughts reverted to herself. Where was Death? He moved about the village frequently enough. Was he never coming to her?

When eight o'clock struck she was suddenly seized with an overwhelming desire to see Harry again and to hold Effie in her arms. Wondering that she was able to move, she got up and stood for a moment in the middle of the room.

Then she went to the door. It opened softly. She found herself caught hungrily and held passionately against Harry's heart.

* * * * *

When Bill, tired of waiting outside the door, sneaked anxiously into the room, he found Helen seated by the window, with a gleam of winter sun upon her hair, and Harry kneeling at her feet, with his arms round her. He heard Helen say something that he didn't understand about speaking to Effie that day, and about Effie and Archie—"the future Mr. and Mrs. Graham." "One of these fine days, bless their hearts!" said Harry. And he heard Best-of-All whisper "Dearest" once and twice and three times.

Then he sneaked out again, and as he ran downstairs, with something hot and wet upon the short hairs round his eyes, he said, "That's good!—oh, that's most awfully good!" And being a dog, and a youngish dog, and not knowing how else to show his joy, he rushed out into the garden, chased a leaf, barked at the sun, and ran wildly round and round the house.

Mary Anne hammered the gong for breakfast, and Harry stood up.

"God's in His Heaven, darling," he said. "I wonder what's for breakfast?"

THE END





UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA



3 0112 046418064